

The Workhouse Graces

In the little Irish town of Ballykeen there is an ancient workhouse. There for many years old people have been looked after by nuns of the Order of Grace. But the workhouse is not what it was. There are only three nuns left—Sister Peter, Sister Paul and qucerly named Sister Borgia, the cook—and only one object of charity—old Sarah Slaney who is just about to celebrate her 104th birthday. Now that commercial interests plan to buy the workhouse site for a factory, and the Mother Superior of the Order wants to recall Peter, Paul and Borgia back to the near-by nunnery, it looks as if the old place is doomed. But once George Pepper, reporter on the *Argus*, has come to interview old Sarah Slaney on her birthday, events follow that produce drama, despair and amusement in Ballykeen for many weeks to come.

NOVELS BY
UNA TROY

Mount Prospect

Dead Star's Light

We Are Seven

Maggie

The Workhouse Graces

UNA TROY

The Workhouse Graces



HEINEMANN

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Chapter One

"And to what," asked young Mr. George Pepper, brightly, "do you attribute your remarkable longevity?"

His pencil ready poised over his notebook, he flashed an encouraging smile in the general direction of the bed.

Mrs. Slaney said: "Huh?"

Nestling amidst her pillows, a fluffy blue crocheted shawl over her shoulders and a square of snowy lace on her head, she looked horrible. From a face like a melting candle, small brown eyes peered suspiciously at Mr. Pepper, pale toothless gums gleamed at him and a round, button nose twitched. "Huh!" she said again, sticking out her lower lip on a disgusted expiration, and a wisp of white hair stirred coquettishly on her forehead.

Fascinated, George Pepper stared at the ghostly ringlet and then at the pink glisten of scalp showing through the delicate lace pattern. There was a little girl, he thought, recklessly, and she had a little curl, and then he stared at the iced birthday cake resting on the bed-tray over Mrs. Slaney's stomach and tried to concentrate on that instead. Finally, as the silence remained unbroken except for several further contemptuous puffs from Mrs. Slaney, he gave a pleading glance for aid to the two nuns of the Order of Grace standing at the head of the bed.

Since escorting him to the bedroom, neither had spoken. At one bedpost was Sister Peter, squat and sturdy and square-faced, the voluminous black robes static about her motionless form lending her the fashionable air of a grotesque modern sculpture, at the other was Sister Paul, tall and thin, with the pale long face and liquid eyes of a kind old

horse, constantly and almost imperceptibly swaying as if in a slight breeze, so that her heavy draperies seemed to hang and flutter from her with a chiffon-like effect. Their withdrawn silence had implied, courteously, that Sarah Slaney was all his.

But now Sister Peter stirred within her coverings and folded her hands over where her waist might be. She regarded her petulant charge with an impassive, red face. She said, slowly and distinctly: "Mr. Pepper is wondering, Sarah, how you have lived so long?"

After his three months' apprenticeship on the Ballykeen *Argus*, George Pepper had a tendency to shrink from the unwrapped phrase and Sister Peter's seemed totally unwrapped. He hastened to elaborate it.

"On the occasion of attaining such a ripe old age, our admiring readers would be interested to know——"

"I'm not deaf," said Mrs. Slaney, peevishly. "I heard you the first time. They comes asking me that every year. For years. They ought to know by now."

"I'm new," said George Pepper.

"You looks it," said Mrs. Slaney, frankly, and relapsed into brooding silence.

She left George Pepper unabashed. Small and flaxen and looking even younger than his twenty-three years, his deceptively innocent appearance was his chief asset and he made full use of it whenever necessary. He cast another glance for assistance at the Grace nuns. Immediately Sister Paul swayed forward protectively.

"Mr. Pepper is a very promising journalist, Sarah." Gently, but reprovingly, she smiled at Sarah and then consolingly at George. "We couldn't fit a hundred and four candles on the cake, so we put one for each decade and four single candles in the centre, you see, Mr. Pepper."

George Pepper said: "Very pretty."

"It *looks* all right." Mrs. Slaney put her head on one side

and sneered at her cake. "It mightn't taste so good. That Borgia one is past her best."

"Sister Borgia is our lay sister." Sister Peter added, firmly: "An excellent cook."

George Pepper nodded appreciatively. Sister Borgia had opened the hall-door to him. She was small and round and full of energy as a bouncing ball and certainly seemed to thrive on her own cooking, though her choice of a name in religion appeared, considering her calling, singularly unfortunate.

"There are only the three of us nuns here, Mr. Pepper. Sister Paul, Sister Borgia, and myself."

"That's right." Mrs. Slaney heaved a reminiscent sigh. "An' all of 'em looking after *me*. Only them an' me left, rattling round like peas in the old Workhouse." Gladly, rapidly, George Pepper's shorthand dashed along the page. "I mind when there was a Matron—a regular old strap!—and a Master—he was a devil—and hundreds of us paupers. Them was hard days." She paused. "Are you taking me all down?"

"Yes," said George joyfully.

"Them was hard days. Cruel and skim milk—and lucky, at that, if you got enough to fill your belly."

Sister Peter coughed. Discreetly, George stopped writing.

"We got fed fair enough when we was sick. No thanks to that mean, raging devil of a Master! It was Peter here, an' Paul, seen to that. Good nurses they was in their time, I'll say that much for them." George's pencil was moving rapidly again. "All past their best now, though, like Borgia." Mrs. Slaney glared challengingly at Sister Peter. "You're no chicken!"

"No," said Sister Peter.

"Seventy, if a day."

Sister Peter said placidly: "Sixty-eight."

"An' you look every moment of it," said Sarah. She gave

a beady glance at George. "Will I be on the front page of the *Argus* a' Friday, young fella?"

Hopefully, George said: "Yes."

"An' me photy. They always takes me photy." Mrs. Slaney indicated the table beside her where two rows of teeth scowled distortedly from a glass of water. "I puts these in for me photy."

"That will be splendid. But perhaps you'd tell me a little more about your life first. You are, you know," said George, regarding the old creature with a sense of awe, "a link with the past."

"That's what they all says." Mrs. Slaney gave a gusty sigh. "Them was hard days."

Slightly worried, George realised that, so far, neither he nor Mrs. Slaney was being original. No doubt it was difficult to get a new angle on centenarians because usually the only remarkable thing about them was simply that they were there at all. But a good newspaper-man should surmount difficulties. 'To be able to present ordinary material with such a freshness of approach that it seems extraordinary is the hallmark of the competent journalist,' declared the Correspondence College in which George had enrolled in his ignorant salad days and which had awarded him its certificate in blue and gold. Although the pretty parchment was an object of ridicule to his present sophistication, not all the fee had been sheer waste.

"Your recollections must go back to the days of the Potato Famine." He qualified his statement cautiously. "Almost."

"Aye. I suppose I goes back that far, all right, does I, Peter and Paul?"

"Not quite. You are only," said Paul, rather chidingly, "one hundred and four, after all."

"Ugh!" said Sarah, disappointedly.

"A wonderful, a really wonderful age," said George fervently.

"Ugh!" said Sarah, brightening.

"The oldest woman in Ireland. Completely astounding."

Very brightly, Sarah said: "Ugh!"

George thought of Girlie, darling Girlie, agog for Friday and his first signed article; he thought of all that he had learned from his expensive postal counsellors, every anonymous one a guaranteed eminent journalist. 'To make the interviewee eager to talk,' said the College, which had dealt almost wholly in platitudes, 'is the secret of the successful interviewer.' Putting forth all his charm, George set about making Mrs. Slaney eager to talk.

"If you would let me have a few details of your life—in your own words?"

Mrs. Slaney cackled.

"Couldn't use anyone else's, that's a fact." George laughed heartily. Mrs. Slaney leaned back, proud of her biting wit. "Let me see, now." George waited. "Them," said Mrs. Slaney, "was hard days."

Undaunted, George asked, enticingly: "What was hard about them?"

Contemptuously, Mrs. Slaney said: "Everything. Everyone knows that. People wouldn't put up with them days now."

George said sadly: "People aren't what they used to be."

"Soft," said Mrs. Slaney.

"Soft," said George.

"We wasn't," said Mrs. Slaney boastfully. George nodded respectfully. "Snaggin' turnips in the depths of winter. There was a share of us in it. Pappy and Mammy drank until it killed 'em. There are," she said thoughtfully, "worse ways of dyin'. They tell me drink is dear now. 'Twas cheap then. There's some things to be said for them old days, mind you!" George nodded nostalgically. "Then I married. I can't remember much about me husband, but I suppose he was the same as any other man. Well, he musta been," said Mrs. Slaney reasonably, "because I had ten children. Or eleven,

maybe. All dead now, I think. Aren't they, Peter an' Paul?"

"Mrs. Slaney has no one belonging to her, as far as we know."

"They weren't much use to me, alive or dead. When himself went and I got this artyrites, I has to come to the Workhouse. Then, after a while, I took to me bed altogether. I'm in it now for—how long, Peter an' Paul?"

"Thirty years."

George Pepper's carefully stony reporter's heart gave one sympathetic lurch for the wretched old creature. Then he attended unemotionally to his note-book.

"Arr! Well, there was all us paupers an' then there was a change o' government, or something——"

"The Irish Free State came into being," said Sister Peter, accurately.

"Arr! We druv the English out. Whether on the gallows high," declared Sarah Slaney, in a peculiar cracked drone, "Or on battlefield we die, sure what matter when for Ireland dear we fall!" She raised her hand on the last note. "Arr! So then there was no more workhouses. They called 'em—— What did they call 'em, Peter an' Paul?"

"County Homes," said George Pepper.

"The same thing, o' course, but sounded nicer," said Mrs. Slaney, patriotically. "They closed this workhouse an' sent the paupers off to the County Home. But Peter an' Paul was allowed stay on here with some of us old ones. Six of us. The other five is dead. No lastin' in 'em," said Mrs. Slaney, censoriously.

"Plenty of lasting in *you*," George said gallantly.

Sister Paul said: "Oh, I *hope* so!" with a fervour that George found pathetically optimistic.

"All me senses still. Put that in, young man! They all do. Put in about me being the last of the paupers——" She hesitated. Some fresh wrinkles appeared on her forehead. "They calls 'em something else now."

"Under-privileged?" George suggested.

"Put in about me being the last of the under-privilegeds with all me senses still."

"And that you owe your wonderful record to the care of the Sisters?" said George, and gave a small, mannerly bow towards the head of the bed.

Sighing with infinite self-pity, Sarah Slaney said: "I wouldn't say them ones had much to do with it. I had to manage it on me own, God help me!" She studied George with great intensity and then her nose twitched. "As you're new, young man, I'll give you some sound advice. I'll tell you how best to keep on livin'." She paused. "Plenty of eatin', plenty o' drinkin' "—she squinted derisively at each nun and uttered a fearful cackle—"an' plenty o' somethin' else!"

Sister Paul whispered, compassionately: "Inclined to wander. Naturally."

"Not now I'm not." There was no doubt that Sarah Slaney's hearing was all she had claimed for it. She leered invitingly at George. "Don't get the chance, young fella!"

"And now," said Sister Peter, "perhaps you would like to take Sarah's photograph, Mr. Pepper?"

It took a long time to get Mrs. Slaney's teeth in. Strangely, she looked worse with them than without. It took a long time to photograph her, too. Although, in her situation, she could expect little variation of pose, she insisted on being taken from several angles and arranged herself with care for each. Very thankfully, George left her at last, her teeth still in, her face bent skull-like over the enormous box of chocolates the *Argus* had sent her and followed Sisters Peter and Paul along the corridor to the parlour.

As they entered the room, a dog jumped down from a chair. It was small and white and stout, with short legs and a short tail, and seemed predominantly terrier. Belly to the ground, it pulled itself forward to George in a threatening, serpentine manner and growled at his shoes.

"Good dog, Tim!" Sister Paul said benignly. "Pat him, Mr. Pepper."

Bravely, George stooped and patted. Tim stiffened. Then he relaxed and licked one shoe.

"He *likes* you." Sister Paul took George's hand and folded it between both her own. "Dogs *know*." She gazed searchingly into his eyes. "Girlie Dillon has told us so much about you, Mr. Pepper." Uneasily, George wondered how much Girlie had told. Evidently, plenty, for Sister Paul shook her head and said, commiseratingly: "Ah, young love! Young love!"

Beside him, Sister Peter said: "We were anxious to meet you." He turned to her. She was regarding him thoughtfully. "You'll do," she said, briefly, to herself rather than to him.

"He'll make Girlie a good husband, Peter."

"Judging by what wives tell us, no man does that, Paul. But he should be as good as any."

Paul gave George's hand one last comforting squeeze and released it.

"Girlie has asked us to pray that you and she will soon be in a little home of your own. We will do all we can to help you."

George said politely: "Thank you!" and then gave a controlled, cynical laugh. "The trouble is, no one wants us to be in our little home. *My* parents think I'm very young and *hers* think I'm not a good match."

Peter said, consideringly: "Both sets of parents are right, of course." Paul and George looked at her, surprised and reproachful. "Well, aren't they?"

In a hurt voice, Paul said: "Young love!"

"All very well," said Peter, sensibly, "but marriage is another thing. You're bound to get older, Mr. Pepper, so that objection will solve itself. What you must do of your own accord is to succeed in life. And to start with," she said

practically. "you must write a really good article on Sarah Slaney. Paul and I will do our best to help you with anything you want to know."

She glanced around the room and frowned. It was furnished as the usual convent parlour, with a general impression of bare shining cleanliness and pious, ugly statues and pictures, except for three arm-chairs pulled up to a small fire in the grate. These were old and shabby and comfortable. Tim lay stretched warily in the most comfortable. Peter stared meaningly at him. Tim put his head on his forepaws and went to sleep. Paul quickly led George to a vacant arm-chair, waved Peter to the other and sat down herself on a straight wooden chair. Peter settled in with a scornful grunt which included Paul and Tim, planted her feet firmly on the floor and leaned forward with her hands on her knees.

"Mr. Pepper!"

"Perhaps," Paul suggested softly, "it could be George?" To George she said, apologetically: "Girlye Dillon has made us feel we know you so well. And you do look—you do look rather young to be called Mr. Pepper." She added, hastily: "Young to *us*, I mean. But, of course, *quite* mature to your contemporaries."

"Please," said George, "George."

Peter had listened impatiently to this interruption. She started again.

"George! I told you Paul and I would give you whatever information we had for your article on Sarah Slaney. Now I want to tell you that you can help us, too, with that article, help us very much indeed, if you will." She and Paul exchanged glances. "We can trust you, George."

It was a statement, not a question. Even in his extremely short career on the *Argus* those who had trusted George had discovered, too late, that ink, not blood, pumped his heart. But now it beat in strong and honest answer to the Graces. He bowed his head. Peter and Paul came closer to him on

either side. Sitting erect, hands folded in their laps, they drew deep breaths.

"We are," said Peter, solemnly and distinctly, "in a precarious position."

George sat erect also.

"Please open your note-book, George, and listen! We will begin at the beginning."

The beginning was almost fifty years ago when Teresa Mulligan and Bridget O'Meara, both small farmers' daughters, had become the novices Peter and Paul of the Order of Grace in Ballykeen. From their cells in the beautiful convent on the eastern headland of Ballykeen Bay, they could look across the water to where, beyond the small seaside town, the Workhouse stood grim and forbidding against the sky on the western headland. The Grace was a teaching order, but it had been, then, its tradition to give service otherwise wherever and however needed. When Peter and Paul were professed nuns, they were sent together to the Workhouse to nurse the inmates.

"We didn't know much about nursing," Paul said, taking up the tale, "but we were better than the women that were there before us. They weren't proper nurses either, and they—well, they drank." Extenuatingly, she added: "Nurses often did, in those days."

"Considering the conditions," said Peter, "it wasn't surprising."

"We learned to nurse, George. Dr. Gorman, who was doctor to the Workhouse then and still attends Sarah, was very patient with us. And some of the paupers helped to teach us, too." Paul paused. "Though they were mostly best at laying-out."

George was aware that, forty years ago, *Oliver Twist* would have found himself quite at home in any Irish workhouse. He had mugged up workhouses for his forthcoming interview with Sarah. He had mugged up the Workhouse Graces,

too. Before meeting them he had been predisposed against Peter and Paul by hearing them called, so often and by so many, angels of mercy. But now that universal Ballykeen phrase troubled him no more. They didn't look in the least like angels. If he had been an old-time pauper, he'd have been glad to have them around.

"Then, as you know, George, the worst of the old work-houses were shut. This was one of the worst."

Bad as it was, some few of its wretched inhabitants had become attached to it. When all the rest had been moved to their new quarters in Dungarvan, Peter and Paul, with their hand-maid, Borgia, had been allowed, by a sympathetic Reverend Mother in the Grace convent and an agreeable Government, to remain at their post in the old Workhouse in charge of a failing half-dozen paupers who clung with the desperation of misery to the familiar surroundings that had been their only refuge in a brutal world.

"That Reverend Mother," Paul whispered, "was Blessed Mother Assumpta. She cared for everyone equally, paupers or queens. She wouldn't have those six old women made more unhappy than life had already made them."

"She will soon, we all hope and pray," said Peter, "be declared a saint."

George knew that. Everyone in Ballykeen knew it. The town was inflated with pride in the certainty that it would have its own saint. It was enormously superior to most places in already having its Blessed.

Peter said slowly: "Blessed Mother Assumpta told us to stay here until the last of the old women was gone. Please put that down carefully, George! *Until the last of the paupers was dead.*"

Everyone knew that already, too, but George put it down. For a few moments, Peter and Paul lapsed into brooding melancholy. Then Peter shook herself and continued.

Thirty-five years and six paupers ago, there had been no

trouble. Twenty years and one pauper ago, the first signs of it appeared. With Blessed Mother Assumpta gone to her reward, another, more business-like, Reverend Mother had suggested that it would be as well for Sisters Peter, Paul and Borgia to return to the convent, bringing with them (she was neither unreasonable nor callous) Sarah Slaney, their remaining pauper, to whom, after so long, they might understandably be devoted and for whom, in any event, the end must be near. Peter had pointed out firmly, and Paul equally firmly, though in a quavering voice, that Blessed Mother Assumpta had allotted them their task at the Workhouse until the last of their charges had passed away. The Reverend Mother continued her gentle, fruitless persuasion, but Peter and Paul stood staunchly by Blessed Mother Assumpta. Since then, while the occupant of the position of Reverend Mother had varied according to the rule of the Order, each had made the same suggestion to Peter and Paul. Of late, curates, parish priests, and even the Bishop himself had all (though less insistently) made it. Still Peter and Paul stood fast and, in their shelter, Borgia. And still, thwarting the wishes of the Order of Grace, the astonishment and boast of Ballykeen, the cherished treasure of Peter, Paul and Borgia, Sarah Slaney lived on.

But now a new Reverend Mother, who had come to the convent from the Grace Mother House in Dublin, was showing the most unflagging zeal to have her three stray Sisters back in the convent where, as she made it perfectly plain, she strongly felt they should be. Reverend Mother Rosario was more to be reckoned with than anyone (even the Bishop) the Workhouse Graces had yet encountered. Aristocratic, cultivated, intelligent, she had been used to command both in the world and in religion and unflinchingly set about subduing three errant old nuns to her will. Even though she could not breach the bulwark of Sarah Slaney, behind which the Workhouse Graces sheltered, yet they felt themselves in

direst peril and redoubled their petitions for succour to Blessed Mother Assumpta.

Paul moved uneasily.

"Recently Reverend Mother Rosario mentioned a rumour that some group wished to start a factory in the Workhouse, if it were available. She thinks it selfish of us not to leave it available." Both nuns looked unhappy. "Manufacturing religious statues, too," said Paul, miserably, "which makes it *more* selfish, of course."

"Never you worry," said George kindly. "Any journalist worth his salt can tap the feelings of his community, and I can tell you the town would far prefer to have yourselves in the Workhouse than statues."

Paul laid a hand on Tim for comfort. He licked it and went to sleep again.

"We're set in our ways, George. We're too old to go back to convent life now."

Every morning, turn and turn about, two of the Workhouse Graces crossed Ballykeen to Mass at the convent chapel while the third watched over Sarah. Every evening, two went to Devotions. So, daily, each one returned for a space to the cool calm of the cloisters, to the scent of incense and bees-wax, to the gentle discipline of a pious, contented Sisterhood, and, thankfully, each of the three left all these behind in the shining, beautiful convent to come back to the hideous building on Workhouse Hill.

"It was a mistake," said Paul wistfully, "to get so set in our ways."

Often, each in her secret heart, Peter, Paul and Borgia thanked God for His goodness. They thought themselves the happiest and most fortunate women in creation. Orthodox and more or less obedient Sisters of Grace, known to be above reproach, respected and loved by Ballykeen, they lived in innocent, glorious and jolly freedom in this world while heading straight as anyone can hope for a better. No women

could ask for more.

"Mistake or not," said Peter, "that's how it is." She hesitated. "You understand, of course, George, that Reverend Mother is not *commanding* us to return? If she were, we would have to obey under pain of mortal sin. She is merely," said Peter, unemotionally, "*advising* us."

Paul gave a slight shudder.

"*Strongly* advising us."

George said firmly: "I understand everything. This will make a full-page spread on Friday, Sisters, if they don't cut."

Paul said, diffidently: "We may have some slight influence with the Editor."

Peter jerked her head sideways.

"She's 'Viola'."

Dumbly, George stared at 'Viola', whose little Nature poems in the columns of the *Argus* had given him many a hearty laugh. Then he came to himself and murmured something appreciative while Paul, flushing, twined her long fingers together.

"The Editor's a good friend of ours," said Peter. "We were able to help him in a certain family difficulty once. I don't think he'll cut you down."

George left the Workhouse with six pages of his note-book filled. The two Graces and Tim came with him to the hall door. By that time he felt he was George even to Tim.

He stopped under the high stone arch of the gateway and turned for a last look back across the wide, gravelled courtyard. On every side the enduring granite of the empty Workhouse buildings loomed desolately, shutting out the sparkling sea, shutting out the small, bright town clustered below Workhouse Hill around the curve of the bay, shutting out from the view of Peter and Paul their mother convent, big and prosperous and glowing pearly now in the evening sun, on the opposite headland. Standing there in the doorway that led to the few inhabited rooms in all this echoing gaunt-

ness, the empty gloom tunnelling above them to the sky, they looked very small. Anyone not knowing what he knew now would yearn to rescue them from their dreary gaol. The tactical note to be struck in the *Argus* was, obviously, dedicated selflessness. Prisoners of their own charity, thought George (a nice phrase), and waved affectionately to the short, square figure and the tall, thin one and even to the dog, and went away, inspired. .

Thoughtfully Peter stumped and Paul floated back to the parlour. Tim got there before them and leaped immediately to his chair. Peter, still deep in thought, gave him an absent-minded pat. Paul came to the surface first and broke the meditative silence.

"It almost seems as if God sent that young man to us."

Fairly, Peter reminded her: "And Girlie Dillon."

"Working through Girlie." Paul hesitated. "One could take it as a sign." Peter, musing, forgot to agree. Paul stirred uneasily. "You do believe, Peter, in spite of so many advising us, that God *does* wish us to stay here?" .

Whenever, as sometimes happened, Paul's conscience became over-scrupulous. Peter said, simply: "Think of Sarah." She said it now. And, of course, when one thought of Sarah, it was likely God did.

Paul smiled gratefully at Peter. Then, instinctively, they went together to see Sarah.

Often, to reassure themselves, they did this. Now they found her asleep. Before sleeping, she had, if not eaten, at least smeared some of the *Argus's* chocolates about her mouth, upset the remainder on the bed and tumbled her birthday cake to the floor. Borgia was on her knees, tidying up the mess.

Paul wrung her hands over the scattered fragments of white icing.

"Oh, Borgia! Your lovely cake!"

Borgia stood up, panting, and tightened the strings of her blue and white checked apron.

"It's only some of the icing off, Sister. The cake's not damaged."

"You'd never guess," said Peter, contentedly, "that Sarah had such strength."

"It was a light cake," said Borgia sharply. "It didn't need strength."

"Beautifully light, of course," said Peter, still contentedly. "But even so!"

"She did it before my very eyes," said Borgia, "to spite me."

Fondly, all three gazed down on Sarah Slaney. She was breathing. The Workhouse Graces asked no more of her.

Chapter Two

'To fair Ballykeen, with its fine golden strand,
Come gentle and simple from all over Ireland,
For to drink the spa waters and enjoy the sea breeze,
And holiday there at their comfort and ease.'

Early Eighteenth-Century Ballad.

"Do you know the tune, darling?" asked Girlie Dillon.

"Tune, darling?" said George Pepper.

"For the ballad. I never heard it."

"There isn't a tune. There isn't a ballad, either. I made it up myself."

"Oh, *George!*" Girlie raised adoring eyes from the *Argus*.
"You *are* clever."

George said, modestly: "I think it reads all right."

"It's perfect. It's a perfect way to begin your article. It's a perfect article."

"Not bad," said George.

They were silent in mutual admiration of the front page of the *Argus*. It was all George. Possibly due to 'Viola' and the Workhouse Graces' assistance in domestic affairs, possibly (George hoped) due solely to the Editor's recognition of sheer merit, George had been given his fling.

The chill June wind crept around the corner of the rock where they were sheltering and tried to tear the paper from their hands. From the centre of the page, Sarah Slaney's face flapped up at them. Girlie pushed her back.

"She looks very old."

"Well, she is."

"I mean she looks *very* old. She doesn't look nice."

"She's not."

"You made her sound nice, though," Girlie mused. "Aren't there ways of photographing through gauze or something?"

"We did the best we could. We blurred her a little."

Blurred, but horrible, Sarah leered lasciviously at the lovers. Girlie patted her gratefully and then flattened her to the sand with four pebbles. Enabled now to view the *Argus* with her arms free, she put them around George.

"*This* should make them think!"

"There's been plenty of thinking," said George morbidly, who knew well enough who 'they' were.

"I mean think differently. After all, a front-page article——"

"In the *Argus*!"

Girlie removed her arms from George. She sat up straight. She said, sharply: "Very well. Only in the *Argus*. Everyone has to make a start." George muttered that any fool could do that; it was how you finished that counted. He sounded so unusually despondent that Girlie stopped being bracing and instead became appealing and fluffy and big-eyed. In a broken-hearted little voice, she said: "Oh, *George*!" Small and crushed, she let herself be comforted for ten minutes. At the end of them, George was his confident, brave self again. The world was his oyster and Girlie his pearl. Satisfied, Girlie tidied her hair. "If they met you and knew you, George, they'd love you. They couldn't help it. Anyway, in two years' time I'll be twenty-one and we can be married whatever they say." As always, when she consoled him thus, George told her, but kindly, that she would find it hard to go so directly against her bourgeois instincts. Being the only daughter of a wealthy shop-keeper was, she knew, since knowing George, very bourgeois, but Girlie was sure she could go against those sorts of instincts for George. "When I'm married to you, I'll be intelligentsia. Actually, being engaged to you almost makes me intelligentsia already."

"All I want you to be,' said George fatuously, "is Mrs. Pepper."

Girlie gave him a slow, loving smile.

"I'll certainly be *that*."

'Mrs. Slaney touched the sugar rose-buds that decorated her birthday cake. She said, simply: "The Sisters know I like flowers." She glanced at the vase of crimson ramblers on her table. The whole room had been transfigured with a festive air by these angels of mercy.'

Mrs. Dillon took off her spectacles. She sighed. Despite her natural abhorrence of George Pepper as a prospective son-in-law, his article had touched her deeply. She thought it was beautifully put. She said so to William. Mr. Dillon, who had studied it already said, briefly, that the young man could fill a page.

A passionate devourer of love stories, Mrs. Dillon desired romance only in fiction. She had neither expected nor got it from William and she had always been reasonably comfortable and contented. She certainly did not approve of it upsetting Girlie, for whom she wanted the best in life, too. But if George Pepper could write like this—not about love, of course, but still with a suggestion of lavender and lace and gentle sadness that caught at your throat and was almost as good as love—then, for the first time, she began dimly to understand what Girlie could see in him. She started when William spoke as if echoing her thoughts.

"I can't imagine what that child thinks she sees in him." He blew his nose crossly. "A little runt!"

Mrs. Dillon paid her honest tribute to the pleasure George's article had given her.

"He's quite a good journalist, William."

Mr. Dillon did not bother to answer. The only skills he admired were those which made money. He blew his nose again. His wife said, soothingly: "She's young."

"Old enough to have sense. Where is she?"

"Out," said Mrs. Dillon, and guessed with whom.

Obviously so did William. He glared at his wife.

"If you had brought her up properly——"

"We both brought her up," said Mrs. Dillon, spiritedly, "and, anyway, that has nothing to do with it. Look at the things you read of! Even clergymen's daughters——" Mr. Dillon snorted and then seemed to strangle within the folds of his handkerchief. More mildly (William's hay-fever was bad for his temper and his blood-pressure at this time of year) Mrs. Dillon said: "I'll have a word with the Workhouse Graces."

Too late, she realised she could have said nothing less likely to mollify William. Purple and swelling, he stood up.

"Whenever anything goes wrong in this bloody town, someone goes to have a word with Peter and Paul. God Almighty, you'd think they were the Apostles! What are they," he demanded, rhetorically. "but two old—old——"

"Nuns," said his wife, warningly.

"Medieval," said Mr. Dillon. "That's what has made the country as it is! Where else would you see an important industry held up because that pair insist on squatting above on Workhouse Hill instead of getting the hell out of it back to the convent where they belong? Isn't the convent big enough to hold all the Grace nuns without having them occupying the Workhouse as well and taking the bread out of people's mouths?"

Mrs. Dillon was aware that even the best Catholic can be annoyed by bread being taken out of people's mouths if it means money being kept out of his own pocket. William's burst of anti-clericalism did not worry her. But she thought it as well to murmur a reminder of Blessed Mother Assumpta. Mr. Dillon switched his attack and spoke in muted, almost shocked, tones.

"You'd think they'd be anxious to leave the place free for the manufacture of religious objects."

"Well, they're not," said Mrs. Dillon, suddenly getting tired of him.

"Well, they should be," roared Mr. Dillon, "and you can tell them so from me when you meet them, the old—old——"

"Nuns, William!"

"I was about to say angels of mercy," said Mr. Dillon neatly, and stalked out.

'Mrs. Slaney's gaze turned to the window and lingered on the view beyond. "This is the only real home I ever had," she said, wistfully. "It would break my heart to leave it."'

A slight frown marred the serenity of Reverend Mother Rosario's brow and her lips tightened as she laid the *Argus* on the parlour table.

"Sarah's view," she remarked levelly, "is a blank wall."

Father Hanlon coughed and moved uncomfortably in his uncomfortable chair. He was always ill at ease in convent parlours, with their dangerous shining floors and terrifying neatness, and most of all in this one where the subject of Peter and Paul was liable to crop up at any moment. He knew it was certain to crop up today; he had already read his *Argus*.

"The situation," said Reverend Mother, "is ridiculous."

Silently and delightedly, her parish priest agreed. He had a keen sense of humour and no objection in the world to ridiculous situations and, as regards the one under discussion, no objection in the world to having Reverend Mother Rosario planted squarely in the middle of it. The previous Reverend Mother and he had been the best of friends and shared many a joke together; with Reverend Mother Rosario he had nothing whatever in common, and though, even with her, he was not always able to curb his unruly tongue, certainly no joke was ever shared. She was a convert (and those were the devil entirely), a classical scholar and the

niece of an earl and no doubt an ornament to religion, but Father Hanlon (himself not even Maynooth, but only a St. John's man) often fervently wished she were being ornamental somewhere far away from Ballykeen. While always careful to defer meekly to his cloth she somehow managed to make him feel a very brash, unmannered young curate.

"I am convinced that Sarah would dearly love to end her days in the convent with us. It would give her a certain cachet." If there was the shadow of a smile on Reverend Mother's lips it vanished quickly. "She could rank herself as one of our lady guests."

Father Hanlon mentally contemplated those impoverished old ladies resting genteelly and inexpensively at the evening of their lives in the adjoining convent Guest House and a slight doubt assailed him. His unspoken comment was answered immediately.

"She would be apart from them and could not injure their status." Reverend Mother lowered her lids. "And she would be happy in her own."

"She seems happy enough as she is," said Father Hanlon. "That is, if she could be happy anywhere. She's a thoroughly ungrateful old wretch. I must say I don't envy Peter and Paul their job of managing her."

"They're not afraid to manage anything. They even," said Reverend Mother, in astonishment, "think they can manage *me*."

Father Hanlon felt a sudden glow of appreciation for Peter and Paul.

"Ah, they're a stubborn pair!"

"They shelter under our dear Blessed Mother Assumpta's wing." While Reverend Mother frowned at the portrait of the deceased pious nun on the opposite wall, Father Hanlon reflected that Peter and Paul could have found no better wing. The cause for Mother Mary Assumpta's canonisation was at present being introduced in the Vatican. It was this

that had made the State wash its hands and do nothing when obliquely requested to evict the Workhouse Graces from its property, which would have been the simplest and most tactful means of getting them back where Reverend Mother Rosario wished them to be; it was this that had thwarted the not too strenuous efforts of all others concerned, from the Bishop downwards, to shift them. Peter and Paul blandly continued to do what one who would any day now be declared a saint had bade them to do. For their superiors to command them to cease would cause what might amount to a minor public scandal; to request them to cease had, again and again, proved futile. "It is sinful." Reverend Mother paused. "Almost."

"But not quite," said Father Hanlon.

"No," said Reverend Mother, regretfully. Her frown deepened. "Though to have premises which could be put to good use occupied by my Sisters shows an un-Christian selfishness."

"Ah, for God's sake, Reverend Mother, haven't we statues enough already? And after all," said Father Hanlon, encouragingly, "poor old Sarah can't live for ever. And that's the end of Peter and Paul."

"There are recorded cases of people living until one hundred and twenty." There was the suggestion of an hysterical tremor in Reverend Mother's voice. "Or even longer. In Albania and such places."

Father Hanlon said, soothingly: "But not in Ireland."

"No." Reverend Mother was her steady self again. "Will you speak to them once more, please, Father?"

Several times previously, Father Hanlon had, reluctantly, spoken to the Workhouse Graces. Actually, he had started off by speaking and finished up by chatting. The Bishop had finished equally ignobly. But Reverend Mother, please God! would never know of this. Father Hanlon made himself look stern.

"To be honest, Reverend Mother, I won't waste my breath any longer on those two. I don't believe they'd budge for the Pope himself."

"They are," said Reverend Mother, with the awful calm of considered judgment, "disgraceful."

"I understand your feelings," said Father Hanlon, sympathetically, "but don't you think you're letting them run away with you? After all, Peter and Paul don't do anything wrong. And, mind you, I can't help having a sneaking admiration for them." He looked at her slyly. "Haven't you a sneaking admiration for them yourself, Reverend Mother? Surely, in your heart of hearts, you can't dislike the tough old pair?" Reverend Mother looked unaffectionate. Gallantly, he plunged on. "And there's no doubt but the town loves them. In that way, they do us no harm at all. Even in Ireland," he said shrewdly, "we're not loved as much as we were."

"I am well aware the town loves them. If it didn't," said Reverend Mother coolly, "I'd have had them out of there long ago. I realise they act more or less as Mother Confessors to the townspeople. Apart, of course, from holding what amounts to a medical dispensary twice weekly."

Her tone implied chill condemnation of all such officiousness.

"More power to them," said Father Hanlon, recklessly, "for taking some of the load off myself and the doctors!"

With the utmost respect, Reverend Mother looked through him.

"I'm afraid, Father, the fact is you don't *want* to help me."

Cravenly, Father Hanlon said: "I do, Reverend Mother. Didn't His Lordship himself try to help you?" Meantly, he threw the Bishop into the breach. "But if he's beaten, it's no shame to me to admit I'm beaten, too, and you'd be well advised to do likewise." He stood up. "Leave them to time! That's bound to settle the trouble in the end."

"No," said Reverend Mother, thoughtfully. "No, I won't leave them to time."

They moved together to the door. There Father Hanlon stopped and gave her a curious look.

"Between ourselves, do you really think you'd like having them back?"

"No," said Reverend Mother. "At their age and after all their years of independence, it will be most difficult to make them fit into our community." She hesitated. "Indeed, I dread it." She hesitated again and said, decisively: "But this is where they should be. Not driving around in their donkey and trap or walking along with that white dog at their heels or addressing one another without prefix or doing all those various things that are harmless, no doubt, but unseemly for Sisters of Grace. And not," she added, getting to the root of the present matter with a quick, almost imperceptible, flash of anger, "attempting to use the *Argus* to bolster up their position against *me*."

"Aha!" said Father Hanlon. "Annoyed with the fine Italian hand, eh?"

Reverend Mother smiled distantly.

"It has inspired me to seek for a way to use my own, perhaps clumsier, one. I think I may have found it."

"You're a clever woman and good luck to you, but I've done my share, so leave me out of this, whatever it is!" said Father Hanlon, and got away.

'Ballykeen's Spa Hotel has its Edward the Seventh suite where the King stayed one night. He is reputed to have declared that, if Ballykeen could be transported to England, he would gladly let Ireland have Brighton.'

The silence in the sitting-room of the convent Guest House had for some minutes been unbroken except for the rustle of three *Arguses*. Now Miss Bessie Byrne raised faded, but still lively, blue eyes from hers.

"I'd hardly have thought His Majesty could have found enough amusement in Ballykeen." She paused. "Perhaps," she said slowly, "it had its attraction?"

Her two companions looked at her in surprise. Mrs. Murphy said: "But the waters, of course."

"Oh yes," Miss Byrne agreed, "the waters."

Smiling, she bent her attention again on her *Argus* while the others studied her covertly.

Miss Byrne had been brought to the Guest House yesterday by Dr. Smith-Crowley. The lady guests had gathered that she had arrived from England at the Spa Hotel to find it booked out for the annual three days' racing in Tramore and, while taking tea in the lounge before seeking other accommodation, had become faint. The hotel manager, anxious to get her speedily and safely off the premises, had suggested a nursing-home and summoned the doctor. Miss Byrne, insisting that she was completely recovered, would have nothing to do with nursing-homes ("A fine place," she said, scornfully, to Mrs. Murphy, "to spend my first day in Ireland!"), so Dr. Smith-Crowley had compromised by driving her to the guest-house where she would have rest and quiet.

For twelve years the convent Guest House had provided a home of austere but ordered comfort (apart from trifles such as the meat being tough now and again or the too frequent appearance of stewed gooseberries when this fruit was in season—things which could happen anywhere) for Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell in return for a very small weekly payment. Their length of residence entitled them to the two best bedrooms facing seawards, to seats in the big leather carvers at head and foot of the dining-table and to the deference of the other lady guests. Life, for both, would have been as agreeable as life can ever be on inadequate annuities, if these guests had been up to standard. But unfortunately, while always perfect ladies, they tended to be

old, sometimes even senile, and though they died off fairly quickly, replacement made little improvement. Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell were in their seventies, but, since becoming widows, they were young in spirit. They had been excited by the new arrival. Although well-preserved, she was, they judged, their contemporary and seemed young in spirit, too. At first, they had been cautious with her. Miss Byrne was not what they had been accustomed to in ladies of such an age. Her hair had been faintly tinged with ashen gold by some talented hand; her face bloomed with discreetly applied colour; she was obviously well corseted and she was fashionably clad. She spoke in a good English accent and had pleasant manners, but she had a sudden hoarse, jolly laugh that sounded disconcertingly strange in the Guest House. Summing it all up, Mrs. Murphy was afraid—she couldn't put her finger on it, but she was afraid—that Miss Byrne wasn't quite a lady. Mrs. O'Donnell suggested that maybe she was so much a lady that she hadn't to be careful to seem one. There was a type that said 'bloody', and other words and drink whisky and so on, not that Miss Byrne had done any of these things so far, but she somehow gave the impression that at any moment she might. Mrs. Murphy said, huffily, that she had known County people once, too. Before they could quarrel, Mrs. O'Donnell said, recklessly, that whether Miss Byrne were a lady or not, she was a welcome change after twelve long years of those who indubitably were, and Mrs. Murphy, remembering the crippled lady guest, the myopic lady guest and the extremely dull lady guest at present residing in the Guest House, recklessly agreed.

"The cure, Miss Byrne," said Mrs. Murphy, conversationally, "helps to slim. Though I believe the King was a handsome man in his prime."

Miss Byrne touched her delicately rouged cheek and frowned slightly.

"I never cared for beards."

Mrs. O'Donnell, who had had a bearded, bullying and adored father, said, wistfully, that there was *something* about them. Mrs. Murphy asked if Miss Byrne, being a Londoner, might perhaps actually have seen King Edward in person.

Astoundingly, Miss Byrne said: "I knew him." They stared. "Oh, only for a short while." She gave her cheerful, boisterous laugh. "Quite well, but only for a short while. I was on the stage, you see." She looked out of the window across the neat lawn to the blue water. Her eyes were limpid as the sea. "His Majesty was a great patron of the stage."

Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell exchanged meaning glances. All was explained now. 'An actress,' said Mrs. Murphy silently to Mrs. O'Donnell, 'is an actress,' Both were sufficiently informed and broad-minded to know that artistes of any description were as respectable nowadays as anyone else; there was Lady Olivier and Dame Sybil Thorndyke and Dame Edith Evans, and of course, their own Abbey Theatre, stocked with eminently respectable and well-behaved persons. They regarded Miss Byrne not only without disapproval, but with a pleasurable Bohemian thrill.

She chuckled.

"I was a rotten actress."

"Oh, but I'm sure not. Perhaps," said Mrs. Murphy kindly, "we should be familiar with your name, but I'm afraid I've never been much in touch with the stage."

"You'd never have seen Bessie Byrne's name in lights. Anyway, I gave it up long ago."

"It must," said Mrs. O'Donnell, sympathetically, "be a tiring life. All that night work!"

Miss Byrne chuckled again and said night work could be tiring. Then she glanced at the front page *Argus* photograph and inquired about Mrs. Slaney.

They were telling her about Sarah and the faithful Workhouse Graces that remained on in the dreadful old building to tend her when Reverend Mother came to pay her usual

daily courtesy call. She listened, smiling, while her nuns were praised to the newcomer. Miss Byrne thought the whole story most touching. Mrs. Murphy said that they sometimes went to see Sarah and hoped that Miss Byrne would accompany them on their next visit. Miss Byrne said she would like to, if she were still here.

"Oh!" Mrs. O'Donnell couldn't help looking downcast. "I thought you meant to stay in Ballykeen for a while?"

"I do, but what I really intend is to rent a house for a few months."

"You are quite welcome," said Reverend Mother, "to remain with us in the meantime. Dr. Smith-Crowley thinks you should take things quietly, which you certainly can do here."

"To tell you the truth—which I didn't tell the doctor or he might have whipped me off to that nursing-home, whatever I said—the old heart isn't all it used to be, and it played me one of its dirty tricks yesterday. But I feel fine again and I'm more or less intruding here."

"Not at all," said Reverend Mother politely. "As Dr. Smith-Crowley knew, we happen to have a vacant room."

"All the same, I——" Miss Byrne hesitated. She looked doubtfully at Reverend Mother. Before she could continue, Mrs. Murphy, thinking of the cripple, the myope and the dullard that would soon be emerging from their rooms for tea, said, impulsively: "Oh, dear me. *I do* hope you will stay until you get your house."

"Well," said Miss Byrne oddly, "it's a funny place for me to be, but I suppose I can't do any harm."

"For to drink the spa waters and enjoy the sea breeze,
And holiday there," sang Jane Joyce, "at their comfort
and ease."

Third Grade, at recreation in the gymnasium of the Grace boarding school, clapped generously.

"That's only an impromptu air I used, of course. Actually," said Jane, frowning, "I doubt if the ballad is authentic."

Jane's vocabulary would have made any other twelve-year-old extremely unpopular, but not Jane. Because with her, it wasn't showing-off; it was just that she couldn't help it. She had a terrible father and mother.

She was the only day-girl in the convent school. Third Grade knew that Jane's parents wouldn't allow her be a boarder because they were agnostics and wanted to be sure of counteracting nunnish influences themselves in the evenings and, of course, all through every week-end. Jane said those evenings, and particularly the long week-ends, were awfully bad for her psychology, but Third Grade was callous about the damage to her ego as long as it could gather around her at mid-morning break on Mondays for the latest enthralling account of life at the Cottage.

Jane was completely frank about her home life and Third Grade was well-informed about the Cottage and Mr. and Mrs. Joyce and Margaret and, of course, Pompey. The Cottage was really a bungalow and had been called Vista Villa before the Joyces bought and renamed it; it used to be quite pretty and comfortable then, now it was all bare floors and white-wash and plain, unpainted furniture. Mr. Joyce was small and thin and had a small, thin red beard and wrote books and articles about folk-lore; Mrs. Joyce wore loose, smocky kind of clothes ("You'd think," said Jane, "she was always going to have a baby, and she never had anything but me.") and wrote novels, all of them banned in Ireland, which Jane explained meant nothing, and one *almost* banned in England, which did. (Jane said the Order of Grace probably wouldn't have accepted herself in their school at all, only they hoped to save her soul.) Mr. and Mrs. Joyce didn't approve of having domestic servants (Jane said that was something to do with the Brotherhood of Man), but they had to have someone in the house to let them get on with

their own jobs, and at present they had Margaret. Of all the dreadful maids the Joyces had had, Margaret was the worst. She couldn't cook and she was lazy and dirty and secretly wore any Joyce garment or ornament that took her fancy. (Jane said luckily there wasn't much belonging to them of any use to Margaret, who was a rather fashionable girl, actually.) The Cottage, said Jane, (and Third Grade could easily believe it) would have been almost insufferable but for Pompey. But he made up for everything. Pompey was *heaven*.

Third Grade, too, thought Pompey must be heaven. He had pale blue eyes and brown ears and paws and a brown tip to his kinky tail. The rest of him was fawn. His purr was a sort of rusty croak and his mew like a screech. He croaked and screeched incessantly when Jane arrived to him each evening, as if he were trying to talk—trying to talk Siamese, of course, Jane said, casually, not English. The worst of it was that he prowled around conversationally during the day, too, which was disturbing for the folk-lore and the novels. But Jane had sworn that if Pompey were sent away she would cut her wrists and sit in a hot bath, so she thought he was perfectly safe.

Someone said, incautiously: "Sing the ballad again, J.J.," and there was a shocked silence. Jane's terrible father and mother called her J.J. because it was different. The culprit said, hastily: "*I am* sorry, Jane. It slipped out," and Third Grade muttered sympathetically.

Everyone knew Jane was doing her best to be ordinary. She had been brought up to call her father and mother Fred and Alice; now, no matter how annoyed they got about it, she called them Daddy and Mummy. She had made them let her wear ordinary clothes and curl the ends of her hair. She tried to talk as ordinarily as anyone else and not to write English compositions that were too good. When she grew up, she would marry an ordinary man and have ordinary

children and a nice house, like in a woman's magazine. It wasn't fair to call her by those silly initials when she was trying so hard.

Jane said: "It's all right. Things *do* slip," and everyone felt happy again. The Head of Third Grade said: "You're a long time about bringing Pompey to show us him."

"I can't this week-end. We're having visitors. He hates them. He'll be tired and won't look well."

It was understandable that Jane should want Pompey to appear to advantage on his first visit to the Grace school, but Third Grade was surprised that he was such an unsociable cat. Jane said he wasn't, but no one could like any of the Cottage visitors, and the ones that were coming on Saturday were particularly bad.

"He paints and she's economics. They'll spend hours in a pub and then they'll sit around and talk all night."

This sounded promising. Third Grade warned Jane to be sure to remember everything for mid-morning break on Monday. Jane said she would. She said she might bring Pompey to the school on Sunday week.

"Next Sunday I might bring him to the Workhouse to show him that old famous Slaney woman. Just to keep us out of the Cottage for a while and take his mind off things. It might be an interesting experience for him."

'"One hundred and four!" Mrs. Slaney added, proudly: "Dr. Gorman says I'm sound as a bell."'

Dr. James Smith-Crowley (known affectionately to so many as Dr. Jim) chuckled.

"You'll be glad to hear that poor old Gorman's only patient isn't causing him a moment's anxiety."

His nurse-receptionist, who had lately developed a strange habit of silence, said nothing. He gave her one swift glance over the top of his *Argus*. Her back turned to him, she was

arranging instruments on the glass-topped surgery trolley. Screened by his newspaper, he considered her, frowning. Until lately, he had been well satisfied with his Miss Brown; she was intelligent and competent and more popular with his patients than any of his former faithful employees. She was also plainer than any of these had been, but this mattered nothing to Dr. Jim, who wisely kept business and pleasure apart and was indifferent to his Miss Brown's prominent teeth or sallow complexion. But behind his *Argus* now he wondered if, in engaging a doctor's daughter, he had, perhaps, made one of his rare mistakes. A doctor's daughter, thought Dr. Jim, whimsically, had a natural, if foolish, tendency to judge all members of the profession by Daddy's standards, even when Daddy had gained nothing from these except, maybe, an easy conscience.

He lowered his paper and smiled at his receptionist.

"Have I much to do, Melly?"

His smile was famous. It had contributed more than anything else to his enormous and lucrative practice. But he had other excellent qualities: an ascetic face, steady blue eyes, dark hair which fifty years had becomingly touched with grey, a deep, confident voice and an encouraging charm of manner. Added to all these, he was a bachelor, which lent him an air of mystery and inspired hope in many of his patients.

Melisande Brown responded instinctively to that smile that had comforted many a deathbed and showed most of her teeth in return.

"I left the list on your desk, Doctor."

"I dread looking at it. Waiting-room clear, Melly?"

"Yes. Miss Bradly is coming later for her injection."

"And Colonel O'Shea?"

"His appointment is for tomorrow. Before the Arch-deacon's."

"Have we got plenty of penicillin?"

"I ordered more this morning, Doctor."

"Never forgot anything yet, did you, Melly? I'm always hoping I'll catch you out in some mistake. Having the perfect secretary is agreeable but slightly disconcerting." He shook his head teasingly. "How are we for B.12?"

"There are ten ampoules here. What we *are* getting through a lot of," said his Miss Brown, in a flat voice, "is distilled water."

"Quite," said Dr. Jim. He stared at her, tapping his fingers absent-mindedly on his blotter and then gave her another of his smiles, took up the slip of paper from his desk and groaned in mock horror. "Do you think I could have one cup of tea before starting on this damn tread-mill, Melly?"

The first step of the tread-mill was the Sancta Maria nursing-home. Here Dr. Jim was greeted warmly by the Matron. Mrs. Magee was not a demonstrative woman—she strongly resembled a business-like ferret—but she was always glad to see Dr. Jim. Without him, neither she nor the expensive nursing-home could have thrived, or even existed, in Ballykeen, for it was beyond the means of most patients of the other doctors in the town. But Dr. Jim kept it filled. He went cheerily from room to room now, laughingly stealing a rose for his buttonhole from the vase of an anxiety state, patting the hand of a rheumatism, ordering an extra pillow for a tired heart, entering gravely into the worries of a constipation and generally leaving his every neurotic patient definitely improved and all others certainly no worse. Then he and Mrs. Magee adjourned to her sitting-room for consultation.

This was never time-wasting; they had worked long together. But today, having made her customary pithy report, Mrs. Magee hesitated.

"Do you think we could increase Mrs. O'Halloran's dose, Doctor?"

"We-ell!" Dr. Jim hesitated, too. "We *are* rather near the border-line, you know."

"What she's getting isn't keeping her quiet any longer. She's troublesome."

"You have enough to do," Dr. Jim said, considerately, "without trying to keep an old woman from making a nuisance of herself."

"She expects plenty of attention. She's been used to it all her life."

"She's paying well for it, so I suppose she must have it. It might be safer if we could go back to the barbiturates."

"Useless," said Mrs. Magee crisply. "I've tried."

Dr. Jim nodded.

"The important thing is to keep her contented and happy."

They looked at each other briefly. There was no need to say more.

"Thank you, Doctor." Mrs. Magee paused. She coughed. "Your Mrs. Hardwicke sent word she isn't coming in tomorrow." Dr. Jim looked surprised. "She's not coming at all. She's gone to hospital. Peter and Paul again!" said Mrs. Magee grimly.

"It's a pity," said Dr. Jim, "one can't sue nuns for slander. Are you sure about this, Matron?"

"Can't see what else could have made her change her mind, and I know she's been visiting the Workhouse."

Dr. Jim frowned.

"I'm calling to the convent this afternoon. I'll have a word with Reverend Mother."

Dr. Jim's popularity at the convent made his visits there unduly protracted. He was always surrounded by a cluster of nuns, like bees around honey, innocently responding to his charm, bristling at his wicked teasing and uttering shocked, delighted little cries at his almost daring jokes. To-day he escaped quickly from his usual eager audience, went

along to make an ailing old lay-sister happy, and then had his word in private with Reverend Mother.

"I know Sisters Peter and Paul mean well, Reverend Mother. But"—he shook his head thoughtfully—"it might be better to advise them not to take too much upon themselves. It could cause trouble. There are cases where unqualified treatment——" He shook his head again. "I think it should be mentioned to them, for their own sakes."

Reverend Mother sighed.

"You know, of course, that I don't approve of their—quackery."

"My dear Reverend Mother, that's far too harsh a word. Though I believe," he said, humorously, "they apply it to me."

Reverend Mother looked at him with astonished concern.

"You know how it is, Reverend Mother—one can't help hearing gossip. And naturally Sisters Peter and Paul think there's no one like Dr. Gorman."

"They're very fond of the poor old man. But"—Reverend Mother's voice grew stern—"that is no excuse whatever for criticising you. I find it hard to believe they can really be so foolish."

He laughed heartily.

"Maybe I deserve it."

Reverend Mother smiled in response, but her expression was troubled.

"I know you are too sensible to be annoyed with them. They are excellent devoted souls in their way, but I think they have reached an age when they would be better off here in the convent with the rest of us." Dr. Jim murmured a professional agreement. Reverend Mother's fingers folded together prayerfully on her lap. "I have been pressing for this ever since my election to my present responsibilities, but you know my difficulty, Doctor."

Both glanced at the idealised portrait of the difficulty.

"My dear Reverend Mother," said Dr. Jim, cheerfully, "the Workhouse Graces are an institution. Institutions can't be lightly abolished."

An hour later, he repeated the same phrase in the bar of the Spa Hotel. His companion made no reply for a moment. Then, looking into the depth of his brandy glass, he said they could be undermined. Dr. Jim looked at his own brandy.

"That occurred to me."

"It would, Jim, it would. A word here," said Mr. Higgins, airily, "a word there."

Dr. Jim raised a sardonic eyebrow.

"That's what Peter and Paul are using."

"Vaguely?"

"Vaguely."

"Then, as your legal adviser," said Mr. Higgins, "I must say I don't see what's troubling you."

"That's all very well," said Dr. Jim, with justifiable annoyance, "but they lost me a good patient yesterday. And I'm pretty sure the same sort of thing has been happening for a while back."

"Dating from any particular time?"

"Well——"

"I see," said Mr. Higgins sadly. "Mrs. Mackenzie's legacy."

"As my legal adviser," said Dr. Jim, "you thought it a good idea then?"

"It *was*," said Mr. Higgins, dreamily, "a beautiful idea. Simple. Beautiful. And it did no harm to anybody. She had no relatives."

Dr. Jim regarded him unflatteringly.

"Aren't you conveniently forgetting the cousin that turned up afterwards and had heart-to-hearts with Peter and Paul?"

"Pooh, what's a cousin! Better for a young man to stand on his own feet," said Mr. Higgins, bracingly. "And you weren't standing very well on yours just then."

"Nor you on yours."

"You and I, Jim, we have extravagant tastes." Mr. Higgins paused. "And the cost of living is rising."

Dr. Jim said, roughly: "It can rise to hell before I'll chance that again. It never occurs to you that I might dislike the risk of being struck off the Register?"

Mr. Higgins gave him a glance of mild reproach.

"Seems to me it's damn difficult to get struck off that! Well, if you don't want any more legacies, you must try to prevent your old ladies from becoming too fond of you. And that," said Mr. Higgins, with a complimentary bow, "won't be easy."

Dr. Jim's grip tightened on his glass. Mr. Higgins smiled.

"I wish to God," said Dr. Jim, "those bloody old nuisances were back in the convent where they'd have to shut up!"

"And let us get on with our statues. You're coming in with Dillon and me on that, aren't you? Good boy! We'd be fixed up long ago only for that Blessed Mother Assumpta, may she—may the light of Heaven shine on her!"

"I think I need a holiday." Dr. Jim rested his fine forehead wearily on his hand. "Even Melly's beginning to get on my nerves."

"The perfect Miss Brown! My dear fellow, what you need is one of your own inimitable tonics."

Dr. Jim said, gently: "Must you always be the funny man, David?"

"No," said Mr. Higgins. "What's wrong with the faithful Melly?"

"Nothing definite. Merely a general impression that my Miss Brown is developing an unnecessarily lofty standard of medical ethics." He smiled wryly. "It's not comfortable for any man to work with a starry-eyed idealist."

"I'd hate it myself," said Mr. Higgins, candidly, "but your Miss Brown strikes me as far too sensible a woman not to know that a fashionable practice is—well, is a fashionable

practice. Besides, she adores you, like all of 'em." With another wry smile, Dr. Jim nodded. "Maybe it's her age, Jim. I'd say she'll never see forty again, poor girl. Takes some of 'em that way, I believe. But, of course, you ought to know. Throw her a kind word now and then and everything should go swimmingly."

Through his teeth, Dr. Jim said: "Go to hell!"

"I *would* try a brain tonic, if I were you—phosphorus or some such thing, isn't it? I'm afraid," said Mr. Higgins, reprovingly, "you've let those old Workhouse besoms upset you more than they should. Never mind!" He gave his friend's shoulder an encouraging clap. "I know you doctor chaps always have plenty to worry about, but I don't suppose your patients die more than anybody else's, do they—statistically speaking?"

Dr. Jim said shortly: "No."

"That's what I thought—statistically speaking."

"I have all my senses yet," said Sarah Slaney proudly. The sweet, old face broke into a mischievous smile.'

In the narrow hall of Ocean View, Mrs. Finnegan waved the *Argus* welcomingly at Melly Brown.

"I heard your key in the lock, so I brought this along. It's very interesting this week. Mr. Pepper is all over the front page. 'I left them there, willing prisoners of their own charity.' That's Peter and Paul. Isn't it lovely? You'd never guess Mr. Pepper had it in him, would you?"

Mrs. Finnegan took time off to breathe. Melly said, dully: "No."

"I have a fresh mackerel for your tea. Caught only half an hour ago, they were. I don't know if you could manage two?"

"One will be plenty."

"They're small," said Mrs. Finnegan, doubtfully, "but

when a person is off their food there's no use pushing platefuls at 'em.'

She gave a worried glance at Melly. Ocean View took only high-class boarders. At present it had Miss Brown, a doctor's daughter and a doctor's receptionist, occupying the front bedroom and the sitting-room and very high-class; and in the small top bedroom, eating his meals companionably in the kitchen, it had Mr. Pepper, young and not too well off yet, but a journalist and so quite high-class, too, in his way. Mrs. Finnegan was a conscientious landlady. She fed her boarders well, and said it paid to have them going around as walking advertisements. But lately Miss Brown was no advertisement for anybody. Mrs. Finnegan put her head on one side consideringly.

"I wonder, would you fancy a drop of Emu burgundy? They say it gives an appetite."

Melly, turning the handle of the sitting-room door, smiled vaguely and shook her head.

"Here!" Mrs. Finnegan thrust the paper at her. "There'll be a great gap in the town when Sarah goes. You can't help feeling it's a pity they don't have Dr. Jim above at the Workhouse." She raised her voice to Melly, now inside the sitting-room. "But would you believe it, they say you'll never hear so much as one good word for Dr. Jim from the Workhouse Graces because they're jealous for their poor old Dr. Gorman!" She smiled tolerantly. "When it comes to it, I suppose nuns are human like the rest of us."

"I suppose so," said Melly.

"There now!" said Mrs. Finnegan, reproachfully. "That mackerel will be done to a frizzle and you keeping me talking here!"

Melly shut the door and stood for a moment, leaning against it, her eyes closed. Then she opened them and stared in the overmantel mirror. Quickly she closed her eyes again.

Sometimes Melly had a beautiful dream where Melisande,

not Melly, looked back at her from a mirror. The joy of this dream was that it was entirely possible; the face was not new, but simply the old one improved, with the teeth straight, the complexion clear, and no grey ribs in the nut-brown hair. Occasionally she made efforts to convert the dream to a reality with fruit and lettuce and expensive colouring rinses, but she always balked at the last vital step of sacrificing her healthy, crooked teeth to two rows of porcelain perfection.

She sat down at the table, neatly arranged for her meal, leaned her receding chin on her hands and thought, as so often and so despondently, of her teeth and Dr. Jim.

If she had guessed, before coming to Ballykeen, that she was coming to her true love, she would have made sure of coming with a winning smile, whatever the cost in pain and discomfort. Melly, though never yet loved in return, had often loved before, but not as fondly as now. She groaned. That smile might have made all the difference to her life and to Dr. Jim's. Lost and bewildered, she looked fixedly at the salt-cellar and thought of her true love, at this moment driving his car around with his hands so light and deft on the wheel, and of Mrs. Mackenzie, kind old Mrs. Mackenzie, mouldering away in her coffin where perhaps, with more conservative medical treatment, she shouldn't have been at all.

"Or maybe," said Melly to the salt-cellar, "I am quite, quite mad," and stifled another groan as Mrs. Finnegan came in with the mackerel.

'Sarah Slaney's gentle old eyes bent a look of brimming gratitude on the two devoted Sisters.'

In the cottage at the foot of Workhouse Hill, the Goddey Coyle lowered his *Argus* and spat neatly over the top of it onto the kitchen range.

"Gratitude——! You can bet your bottom dollar them two do bloody well outa old Sarah!"

From the corner where she was polishing his boots, his wife

said, timidly: "But they couldn't, Tom. She's only a left-over pauper."

"Pauper, hell! Got her Old Age Pension same as anyone else, ha'n't she? Precious little of it *she* sees, you can be sure."

His wife said: "But——" and then, rubbing away at a toe-cap, wisely said no more.

"O' course they gets their cut. Why else," said Mr. Coyle, expounding his simple philosophy, "would they bother their selves with her?" He spat again and added, morosely: "Battening!"

The Goddey lived in a world where everyone who could batten did so on those who couldn't. He himself belonged to the second luckless category. A man broken, through no fault of his own, by adverse circumstances, he eked out a living on National Health Insurance and Outdoor Relief and was battened on by wife and son. Turning his brooding gaze now from his *Argus* to his wife, he inquired suddenly why she was hanging around the house instead of being at the Dillons'.

Mrs. Coyle laid the boots neatly side by side and straightened herself.

"Mrs. Dillon only wanted me for the spring-cleaning. It's finished."

"Ah! And no other job, I suppose," asked Mr. Coyle, politely, "to be had in all Ballykeen?"

Mrs. Coyle pushed a wisp of faded sandy hair from her forehead.

"I was finding the charring a bit hard lately. I thought I'd wait a day or two." She came nearer to him. "I don't feel so good these times, Tom."

"You don't look it," said her husband frankly. He studied her with unconcealed distaste. She was small and scrawny as an old plucked fowl and with the same unpalatable yellow skin. "God knows, I might as well be married to me grandmother!"

Dully, she repeated: "I don't feel so good."

"For Chrissake!" said Mr. Coyle, "it'll be the last straw if you're going to come crawtacallin' around me. If you don't want to work, no one's asking you. But don't gawp and gawk at me as if it's my fault you're such a miserable angashore! I done all right for you while I was able, didn't I?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Coyle, faintly, and went back to her corner.

The Goddey stretched complacently. His wife had spoken no more than the simple truth. In his earlier days, Tom Coyle had been a fine figure of a man (he was still that, six feet tall and broad in proportion—maybe broader than before and not so muscular, naturally, but fine, for all that) a noted worker and in constant demand as a builder's labourer. He had also been a noted robber. He was well aware of the nickname—the Gaelic equivalent of 'thief'—this latter proficiency had earned him and was secretly proud of it, though only in the wildest insanity of drunkenness had it ever been uttered to his face. On these rare occasions, the Goddey, drunk also, had dealt adequately with the offender. Being big and quarrelsome and robbing only in a small, though frequent way, he had never been brought to reckoning for his misdeeds and indeed the greatest of these, the transfer of a piece of boiling bacon from pot to greatcoat pocket while the woman of the house had her back incautiously turned, was still spoken of with awed respect. Honestly and dishonestly, the Goddey had provided handsomely for his family until, repairing the roof of Hurley's garage, he fell off it.

His injuries seemed comparatively slight, but the consequences were grave. Dr. Jim had warned him from the beginning how serious they might become and, quickly, the Goddey developed vague but constant pains in back and head at the least exertion, weakness, insomnia and a general nervousness. Dr. Jim was not surprised at these crippling debilities nor, when consulted about the Goddey's rights,

was Mr. Higgins. Later, in court, the Goddey had to endure silently doubts cast on his symptoms and integrity, but the Judge agreed with Mr. Higgins's barrister that the Goddey would never again be the man he once was and awarded him a thousand pounds compensation.

When Dr. Jim and Mr. Higgins had been paid, the Goddey found himself left with a much smaller sum than he had expected, but it was still more than he had ever hoped to have in his fist all at the one time. He had a glorious year on it. At the end of the year the idea of work had become abhorrent to him, but he made a few gallant attempts, only to be driven away immediately by vague but constant pains in back and head, weakness, insomnia and general nervousness. Sometimes he wistfully considered falling from another roof, but the trouble was you could never be sure how you'd land and that remained a fond dream. Finally, he resigned himself to his tragic inactivity, with barely sufficient energy remaining for a few mild pilferings to justify his sobriquet.

Roused now from nostalgic meditation by the clatter of a saucepan, he briefly cursed his wife for dropping it and asked for a cigarette. When she reminded him that he had smoked the last of the packet, he told her, amiably, to send young Mickey for more. Hearing that his son was not yet home, he frowned.

"What's he traipsin' around the town for after his day's work?"

"He comes straight back always but sometimes there's parcels to be delivered after the Stores is closed."

"Slave-driving!" The Goddey's mouth twisted. "It's a pity the little perisher hasn't the guts to stand up for himself."

Mrs. Coyle was silent. The Workhouse Graces had used their influence to get herself the job of charring for Mrs. Dillon and Mickey into Dillon's Stores as messenger boy. Her husband despised both results of the nuns' patronage, which his proud soul bitterly resented.

"He's coming," said Mrs. Coyle, gladly.

"Ah! 'Tis Friday evening," said the Goddey, thoughtfully.

Mrs. Coyle looked at him miserably and then looked miserably at Mickey when he came in. The Goddey looked at Mickey, too. The sight gave him no pleasure. The boy took after his mother from his sandy hair to his skinny shins. He was a wretched little runt for his fifteen years.

His father told him so now, and added, candidly, that a man should have known better than to breed off a Foley. Mrs. Coyle flushed and shrank back.

"Got your wages?" inquired the Goddey, genially.

"Yes."

"Hand 'em over!" When the last coin was counted into his outstretched palm, he was silent for a moment. Then he said, still genially, but with a faint note of warning: "Five shillings short, I make it."

The boy put his hands in his pockets.

"I want——" He glanced at his mother and quickly glanced away. "I should be let keep a few shillings for myself."

"Quite the little man, aren't we? Come on, now!" said the Goddey, softly. From behind her husband's back, Mrs. Coyle's eyes implored her son. Slowly he pulled two half-crowns from his pocket and gave them to his father. "That's the boy!" All geniality again, the Goddey yawned and stood up. "I'll take a ramble down to Houlihans' for a fag. Don't get my tea until I'm back, Kate. I might stop half an hour or so if there's anyone there worth talking to."

When the door had closed on him, the boy turned angrily to his mother.

"He'll get drunk again. He's drunk every Friday night now. On *my* money. It's not fair."

"I know, lovey." Mrs. Coyle pushed back her hair with that automatic, futile gesture. "But it's best not to cross him."

"Why shouldn't he be crossed? I worked for that money, didn't I? More than *he* ever does!"

"Hush, lovey!"

"I'm not afraid of him."

Mrs. Coyle filled the kettle and put it on the fire.

"There's a nice bit of cold salmon for your tea Mrs. Dillon give me yesterday."

"He'll come home at all hours and he'll shout at you. And he'll hit you. He does—I know he does."

"Ah, now, Mickey, who'd mind a man when he has drink taken? Your father would never raise a hand to me in his sober senses. Isn't that a grand bit of fish?"

"It's his fault that we have to take charity."

"That's not charity. Mrs. Dillon said 'twould go waste, else." She moved the plate an inch nearer. "Eat up, Mickey!" Hopefully she watched him take up knife and fork, and then, as he put them down, said coaxingly: "To please me, lovey."

"I meant to buy a pair of nylons for you." He stared at the cotton stockings she wore, shapeless and discoloured from washing and seamed with runs "Four and sixpence. Semi-fashioned it says. Are those the right kind, Mammy?"

She turned her back on him quickly to make the tea. It took her a long time to make it.

"Don't worry your head about stockings for me, child. The pair I have will be fine, when I take a needle and thread to them." Coming to the table with the teapot, she gave an amused laugh. "There's no need to go cocking the likes of me up with nylons."

Silently, Mickey watched her pour the tea. He said, thoughtfully: "I'd like to kill him."

Mrs. Coyle's hands flew to her mouth.

"Glory be to God, Mickey Coyle, that's no way to be talking!" She confronted him indignantly. "What would Peter and Paul say if they heard you and they after getting your good job for you and all!"

"I wouldn't mind what they'd say," said Mickey, starting on his salmon, "as long as they didn't ask me to pray for his soul afterwards."

'I left them there, willing prisoners of their own charity.'

Sarah Slaney stared out from the *Argus* at the lounge of the Shelbourne Hotel. Then Gerald K. Simpson laid her face downwards on the settee and beckoned a waiter.

"I'll have a glass of your Gaelic coffee." While it was being ceremoniously prepared beside him, he took up the *Argus* again. "My home town!"

"Really, sir? I should never have guessed——"

"I mean," said Mr. Simpson, "the home of my ancestors. My maternal ancestors."

"Of course, sir. Quite a number of American gentlemen like to look up their connections in the Motherland."

"I hope to be on my way to Ballykeen soon. I've had enough of hanging around Dublin," said Mr. Simpson, gloomily.

"Indeed, sir? Possibly the weather——"

"It's not the weather. I expected rain. It's the people. How long does it take to understand them? How long did it take *you*?"

"I was born understanding them, sir."

Mr. Simpson frowned doubtfully at the politely attentive expression and suavely accented voice.

"French, aren't you?"

"I'm afraid not, sir. Dublin, like all the rest of the staff. But thank you very much, sir."

"Not at all," said Mr. Simpson. "Aren't you proud of being Irish?"

"Excessively," said the waiter, with well-bred lack of enthusiasm. "But in our profession French is considered superior. Swiss even more so." Deferentially he placed the

glass of coffee on the table in front of Mr. Simpson. With a startling change to the adenoidal city brogue, he said, confidentially: "All the same, yer honour, sure I can be a broth of a boy if I'm pushed, begorrah!"

"Ah!" said Mr. Simpson. "You're human."

"Off duty, sir." The waiter raised an anxious eyebrow. "Is the coffee to your liking?" Mr. Simpson sipped and nodded. The eyebrows came down. "We find Gaelic coffee is making our whiskey quite popular with American and English visitors, sir."

"It's the easiest way to take it," said Mr. Simpson, ambiguously. "But I've drunk plenty neat, too, since I came. It saves me from going mad."

"It saves a lot of ourselves from going mad, sir."

Mr. Simpson sipped again.

"I'm in a publishing firm in New York and it seemed a good idea to combine picking up a few manuscripts with taking a look at Ballykeen. I hadn't realised that your writers don't write." The waiter murmured that he had a general impression that there were many writing ladies and gentlemen in Dublin. Mr. Simpson took some more consoling coffee. "Many ladies and gentlemen have been telling me what they intend to write—when they have time. They talk so much that I don't see how they ever can have time." He brooded over his glass. "I'm accustomed to being bored by authors—it's an occupational risk—but here they're all convinced they're George Moores or Oliver Gogartys, which makes it a little more unbearable. I'm sometimes convinced they are, too," he admitted, "late at night. But I'm not a drinking man. Most of my day I see things in a clear, cold, sober light."

"Better for the liver," said the waiter, "but can be trying on the mind."

Mr. Simpson raised his hand.

"Don't misunderstand me! The people here are very, very

hospitable and friendly and not worse than anywhere else. Well, not much worse. Just all hating one another's guts like poison, same as it might be the Village." Morosely, he added: "But I wasn't expecting a home from home."

Hovering sympathetically, the waiter said: "You learned about the Old Land at your mother's knee? I know how it is, sir. Emerald Isle. Saints and scholars. Celtic Twilight. Maybe leprechauns?"

Mr. Simpson stared at him. The waiter stared back, unabashed.

"You *are* a broth of a boy, aren't you?" said Mr. Simpson, admiringly.

"I beg your pardon, sir. No leprechauns. What you want, sir, is to go farther afield. All cities are much the same. We keep our natives in reservations in the west, sir, like your Indians. Possibly you'll find more of what you're hoping for in—Ballykeen, isn't it? Milder climate in the south, too."

Mr. Simpson looked dreamily into the mysterious depths of his glass.

"I left Ireland as an infant forty years ago, but my mother told me so much about Ballykeen I feel I know it. I know my mother's cottage at the foot of Workhouse Hill. These nuns, Peter and Paul," he tapped his *Argus*, "I feel I know them, too. My mother died last year." The waiter appeared stricken as if he had suddenly lost his own. "I want to see the old town for her sake." He regarded the waiter aggressively. "You think that sounds very simple?"

"Not at all, sir."

"I don't care if it does. I *am* a simple man," said Mr. Simpson, "and all I want is to meet simple, sincere people."

"Not many of us left now, sir," said the waiter.

'The sweet, old face broke into a mischievous smile.'

"Read that bit again," Sarah Slaney commanded. Peter

pushed her spectacles up on her nose and read it again. "Me sweet old face," said Sarah, happily. She nodded. "That was a *fine* young man. Ah, you can't judge a book by the cover! They're reading about me all over the world today, aren't they, Peter?"

Peter removed her spectacles.

"Well not *all* over the world, Sarah."

"She means," said Paul, quickly, as Sarah scowled, "not in India, for example."

"Oh, them blacks!" Sarah sniffed. "Them ones can't read."

Dr. Gorman, sitting by the bed, laid a hand on her wrist.

"They'll be wanting you on the films next, Sarah."

"I never," said Sarah, plaintively, "seen a fill-um."

"You've seen enough," said Dr. Gorman, "and you're talking too much."

He took a pinch of snuff. No one spoke while he sneezed and wheezed and patted his stained upper lip. But when he had replaced the snuff-box in his waistcoat pocket, Sarah moaned.

"Talkin' too much, he says. No one don't want to listen to me no more. No one," wailed Sarah, "don't *want* me no more."

"Now that," said Paul, earnestly, "really *isn't* true."

"There's ways of keeping people alive. With lamps and things. I has visitors. I know." Her beady eyes transfixed Dr. Gorman, hunched like a little gnome in the snuff-spattered garments that always looked too big for his ancient, shrivelled frame. "But no one gives me none of them things. After *your* day they was an' you're too old to learn' em now. But I should be havin' 'em."

"Great God, woman," said Dr. Gorman, justly affronted, "haven't I done a good job on you up to now, lamps or no lamps!"

Piously, Sarah declared: "'Twas God's doin'. But if so be He'll need a helping hand——"

"He'll get it," said Dr. Gorman. "Lamps! Pah! Isotopes for you!" Awed, Sarah gaped at him. He glanced at Paul who, hospitably murmuring, had risen to her feet. "I think Sarah could join me today, Sister."

He tugged out his snuff-box and he and Sarah wheezed companionably together while Paul was away from the room. When she returned with the customary half-tumblerful of whisky for Dr. Gorman and an additional smaller amount in a second glass, Sarah, suddenly very lively, stretched out a greedy hand.

"There's no cure like the old-fashioned ones, after all." As she sipped, a beatific smile flowed and ebbed over her wrinkles. "Read more about me sweet old face, Peter."

Chapter Three

The following Sunday brought the first warm day of summer to Ballykeen. The sun shone on the Workhouse Graces, and the sea sparkled at them, as they walked back across the town after the convent Mass. Many who met them stopped for a cheerful word and Peter and Paul were feeling cheerful and chatty, too, so their progress was slow. When they reached the foot of Workhouse Hill at last, Paul broke into one little skipping step for sheer joy.

"Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!"

"H'm. Well," said Peter, kindly, "it's rolling."

"It's a beautiful day."

"Beautiful, thanks be to God! Borgia has kidneys for breakfast."

Paul's spirit had risen far above kidneys. Her ecstatic face turned seawards, head back, eyes closed, she sniffed as if she would draw the whole Atlantic into her dilated nostrils.

"Smell the ozone, Peter!"

"Seaweed," said Peter, impatiently. The walk had sharpened her appetite. "Ozone doesn't smell."

Paul said contentedly: "It's fine enough for us to have our first bathe of the season."

When they went in under the Workhouse archway, they found Richard Burke there before them in the courtyard. They were very glad to see him.

Richard was the son of a farm labourer whose lifelong example of honest toil had deterred Richard from ever doing any steady work at all. In his youth, he had happily tramped the countryside, relying on the charity of his fellow-men to ward off starvation; now that rheumatism had troubled his

middle years, he existed in comparative luxury on Government-sponsored charity in the County Home in Dungarvan. He emerged from it whenever he felt in need of a change of air and strolled the twenty miles to the Workhouse. Here he had his own room, with his own front door, in a deserted wing of the big building, furnished with a mattress and blankets on the floor and the necessities for brewing cans of tea on a small grate. He seemed to regard work as his relaxing holiday hobby and busied himself during his seaside stay with all that was needed to be done around house and ground. While he was with them, Peter and Paul insisted on giving him a pound a week for beer and tobacco and though he grumbled each Saturday at their wasteful nonsense, he took it, and also the ample meals that Borgia provided, though he sometimes grumbled at these, too, unfavourably comparing her catering with the County Home's.

When Paul said now, reproachfully, that it was six months since they had seen him, he looked at her crossly.

"An' the whole place gone to rack an' ruin without me! Is there no one could take a hoe in hand for a minute or two a day at the courtyard? Nor knock a few nails in a board over that mouse-hole in the parlour? Nor have the decency, come to that," he said, very crossly indeed, "to run a brush now and then over that unfortunate ass beyond?"

Paul coughed apologetically. Billy the donkey was Richard's special pride and joy. He spent hours hissingly grooming Billy until the little animal was sleek as velvet. Each time Richard left the Workhouse, he left behind him Ireland's smartest donkey; each first day of his return, he strode about brandishing a curry-comb and swearing over Billy's main and tail.

"But he's in very good condition, Richard."

Richard snorted.

"Very healthy," said Peter.

Richard bent a scornful frown on them.

"As long as the creature can pull the old trap along the road I suppose ye don't mind disgracing yerselves by having him resemble a tinker's ass." A thought struck him. "It's likely I'll have a job with the trap itself?"

Paul said, timidly: "It could do with some polishing."

"I declare to my God," said Richard, turning from them in disgust, "there's not a soul, barring meself, lifts a finger in this place from year's end to year's end."

Humbly, Paul said: "We don't seem to have time."

"That Borgia now——" Ignoring them, Richard communed in a puzzled way with himself—"even if it was only to keep the fat down on her."

Peter took a stride towards the breakfast kidneys.

"We haven't been using the trap much lately but we're going to Tranacapall this morning, so isn't it lucky you arrived today?"

With no Richard, Peter and Paul honourably shared the driving of Billy. He was an excellent donkey, but he had certain disconcerting traits with which Peter could sometimes cope, but Paul never. Richard's sense of fitness would have been outraged by the sight of reins in a nun's hand; from the beginning of their acquaintance he had constituted himself their coachman and a very proud, stylish one he made, sitting stiffly upright and acknowledging all salutations to the equipage with a formal touch of his ashplant to the peak of his cap. Mollified now, he said: "I best see to the ass an' trap right away, so."

Peter turned confidently towards breakfast when Paul said, in a queer voice: "Here's Tim."

Tim was coming under the archway. He came with a crab-like slowness, wagging his tail ingratiatingly. Then he saw Richard and leaped forward, barking frenziedly. Tim and Richard were old friends, but Tim was the Workhouse watchdog and had to show he knew it.

"The little dawg," said Richard, "is looking fit."

Paul said, faintly: "Yes." She moved quickly towards the hall door. "Come, Tim! Good dog!"

Her cunning availed her nothing. For Peter said, suddenly: "Stop!" and pointed down at Tim. Tim, who had begun to come, started to circle Peter in a winning manner. Peter's finger never wavered. "He's been stealing eggs again."

Tim cocked his head charmingly. He was passionately addicted to eggs and had a good knowledge of the best hen-houses within easy range. Mild complaints were sometimes brought to the Workhouse, but no one would raise a hurtful hand against the Workhouse dog and Tim cared nothing for shouted curses. He did not, however, care for Peter's tone. He licked his yellowed whiskers, but traces of his orgy remained smeared extensively over his muzzle.

"This time," Peter said, implacably, "he *must* be beaten."

"He deserves it, sure enough," Richard agreed.

Tim thumped his tail frantically on the ground.

"We find it hard to bring ourselves to whip him, Richard, so it's providential that you are here."

Tim rolled over and stuck his four paws in the air. Richard scratched his head. Paul bounded back to them.

"You must catch him in the act, Peter."

Richard nodded.

"There's something in what she says."

Peter looked at them both.

"Do you expect me to follow him into every hen-house in Ballykeen?"

"There's something in that, too," said Richard.

"I tell you what we'll do, Peter." Paul glanced at Tim's paws and gulped. "We'll punish him by not giving him his orange after lunch. We'll show it to him and take it away again. We could," said Paul, brilliantly, "show him an egg at the same time."

Peter grunted. Paul averted her eyes apologetically from Tim. (He was very fond of his orange.) Richard bent and

patted the reprieved dog's stomach and Tim got up and shook himself and followed the Graces into breakfast.

Two hours later, Billy and the trap, as spruce as possible at such short notice, and Richard, freshly shaved, were waiting. It took some while before primus stove and hamper and bathing things were packed and Tim rounded up, but Richard showed no impatience. He sat, aloof and glorious, until Peter and Paul were seated opposite him and Tim beside him, and then he laid a practised flick of the ashplant to Billy's hide and said: "Gwan!"

Billy gave one friendly preliminary buck and went on. He went carefully and beautifully down Workhouse Hill, setting his newly-blackened hooves expertly as a mountain goat on the smooth macadam, and then trotted crisply along the level.

"At this rate," said Paul, gaily, "we'll be there in no time."

She and Peter smiled at each other. Main Street had a holiday air; it was pretty and colourful with fresh paint on the shopfronts and rainbow-striped awnings, and crowded with people in light summer clothes all bent on enjoying this June day. The sun shone and the sea glistened and the people had happy faces. Paul looked around. In wonder and thankfulness, she said: "Isn't God good?"

At once, in the middle of Main Street, Billy lay down. It was his worst trick and he had chosen the worst possible place for it. A fearful oath from Richard was fortunately covered by Tim's fussy barking, and resting donkey and tilted trap were immediately surrounded by an anxious and helpful crowd.

In a calm, authoritative voice, Peter said to everyone: "It's all right."

A little shakily, Paul said: "He sometimes does it. We keep a special stick for it."

Tim leaped out as many willing hands were helping the nuns from the trap. Richard followed, wearing a terrible

expression. He approached Billy with the special sharpened stick saying, with heartfelt simplicity: "If he's broken a bloody shaft, I'll skin him alive," and dug the point into Billy's side while Tim snapped at his hooves. Paul closed her eyes. This was the only proved way to make Billy stand up, but there was no need to watch. When she opened her eyes again, Billy was on his feet, swishing his tail at the flies and meekly waiting and Richard, still with that terrible expression, was stepping back to his seat. He gathered up the reins and sat, staring straight ahead, while willing hands put the nuns and Tim into the trap and waved it off.

"Well," said Peter, "there's no harm done," and settled herself comfortably on the cushions.

Richard stiffened. Then he brought the ashplant down on Billy.

"Not if ye don't mind making a show of yerselves before the whole of Ballykeen!" In his stony face, the movement of his lips was barely perceptible. "Making a show of me, too—not that *that* matters!"

"Nonsense!" said Peter. "It's a thing could happen to anyone."

The ashplant came down again.

For the next quarter of a mile the only sound was the brisk clip of Billy's hooves along the coast road. Peter and Paul kept silent; Paul because, although she was deeply sorry for Richard, anything she could think of to say seemed only likely to enrage him further; Peter, because she considered it best to let him simmer. And at last Richard boiled over.

"Any fool knows that petting and softness is the ruination of an ass. I've said so again and again but I might as well be talking to the wall. And what's the result of it?" Even Peter quailed before the accusing glare he turned on them. "Before a crowd of gawkers, I'm made to look as if I'm not fit to drive out my nuns!" A cynical laugh escaped him at this

bitter injustice. "*That's* what yer bad handling of the little ass for months back has brought on me!"

The outburst obviously did him good. He began to look human again, even if still exceedingly angry. Gradually, as Billy continued to trot along correctly and fast (only once giving an affected shy at a white-washed gate-post) and Peter and Paul chatted carefully and deferentially, Richard's ill-humour lessened. When Tranacapall was reached at last, he arranged his nuns and their belongings at one end of the little strand and left them and Tim there with a forgiving grunt, bringing Billy with him to the other end where both disappeared from view behind a clump of rocks.

Tranacapall was perfect today. Peter and Paul had it all to themselves, as they had hoped, for it was three miles from the Big Strand at Ballykeen where the holiday-makers were frolicking now in their hundreds. The milky blue-green tide fell over in small, lazy waves on firm yellow sand; higher up, where Peter and Paul sat, the sand was white and soft and warm. Conditions were ideal for the first bathe of the year and they undressed quickly beneath huge, sheltering sheets.

Nowadays, nuns swam in modern suits and Peter and Paul had seen young Grace Sisters lying flat on the sands, sun-bathing in the care of an older nun, like plucked chicks around a big, black hen, but Peter and Paul belonged to another era. When they emerged from their ample sheets, their shapeless, bulky bathing garments were gathered with frills at neck and wrists and knees and surmounted by rubber mob-caps. Hand in hand, with only the wicked amber eyes of gulls to see them (for Tim had gone on one of his usual searches for rabbits) they went down the strand and into the water waist-high, where, face to face, they bobbed up and down three times in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. This was generally considered enough for the annual first bathe, but today the water was so

pleasant that they recklessly bobbed up and down some more and splashed with their hands at the gleaming surface until, remembering their years, they forced themselves out and back to their sheets.

When the kettle was singing on the primus, Paul said, wistfully: "It would be nice if everybody was happy—always."

Sometimes Paul's poetic nature came near to endangering her orthodoxy, but Peter was used to dealing with this. She told Paul to cut some bread.

Tim arrived back for his lunch when the tea was made. He was panting and had an air of having done remarkable things. He lapped up his bread and milk disinterestedly, enjoyed his bone, and barked at a passing gull or two while Paul, with shaking fingers, peeled an orange. She took so long about it that Tim got impatient and barked at her instead. Paul glanced miserably at Peter, but Peter was staring grimly at the sea.

"Peter!" Paul's voice was meek. "I've forgotten to bring an egg."

Peter did not turn her head.

"Well?"

"To show Tim. So I'm afraid he'll have to have his orange after all."

Peter looked at Paul. Disgusted at this slyness, she took the orange and showed it to Tim.

"*Eggs!* Bad dog! No orange!"

"Oh, Peter," said Paul, piteously, "how can he understand?"

"Understand or not," said Peter, "he's not getting it," and put the orange on a ledge of rock beside her.

When Tim (having barked and begged with his front paws raised until he began to overbalance from fatigue while Paul continued to stare at him, silent and woebegone, and Peter to pay him no attention at all) realised at last what was happening, he suddenly went limp. His flesh melted, his bones

became jelly and he lay horribly flattened at their feet, a broken ill-used dog.

"And now," said Peter, "if you're finished your lunch, Paul, I'll call Richard to his."

They did not leave Tranacapall for another hour. Long before that, Tim had recovered and, stoical and brave, gone paddling. And Richard seemed generously to have obliterated the morning's wrong from his memory and was amiable. Even Paul, after a while, looked happier. There was a moment when Peter tended to be annoyed—that was when she offered Tim's orange to Richard and found it unaccountably missing—but it passed. Paul said (looking happy) that a gull might have taken it. She hadn't, she said, actually *seen* a gull take it but a gull *could* have. Richard said he supposed it could. Peter said nothing. Tim, at the tide's edge, savagely attacked some seaweed.

The drive home was without incident. At the town's outskirts, Richard fiercely urged on Billy, and Billy responded gallantly so that the people looked in admiration at the Workhouse trap's swift passage and Richard frequently touched his ashplant to his cap. And, rolling under the Workhouse arch, he said, magnanimously: "All's well that ends well!"

That evening, as Peter and Paul were stumping and swaying away after Devotions across the convent hall to the front door, they were stopped and informed that Reverend Mother wished to see them in her office.

Paul's garments rippled about her trembling frame like shadows on water.

"What can it be, Peter?"

"Nothing," said Peter. Thankfully Paul saw that, as usual when the threat of trouble loomed, she looked sturdy and rooted as an oak. "Maybe she wants to talk to us." She hesitated. Both knew Reverend Mother had no desire what-

ever for unnecessary conversation with them. "Maybe," said Peter, brazenly encouraging, "she wants to invite us to stay to supper in the refectory."

When they entered the office, it was immediately apparent that Reverend Mother had no hospitable intentions. She returned their respectful greetings with formal courtesy and motioned them to be seated. There was an uncomfortable silence while she frowned in concentration at her clasped hands and they waited for her to speak. These silences of Reverend Mother always unnerved Paul and made her want to say something, anything, and keep on saying it, just to hear the sound of a voice, even if only her own, but this time Peter succeeded in steadying her with a warning glance. Peter could wait, too. And at last Reverend Mother spoke.

"I have some news, Sisters, which concerns you."

"Oh, dear me!" Now there was no stopping Paul. "I suppose it's the donkey, Reverend Mother. But there was no harm done and we had Richard, so everything was all right."

The last sentence trailed away into a mirthless laugh under pressure of another of Reverend Mother's forceful silences. Peter sighed resignedly. Reverend Mother looked disdainful.

"I was not referring to the accident you had this morning. Though, from what I heard, that was—unfortunate."

Everything of which Reverend Mother disapproved was either unfortunate or unnecessary. Peter and Paul always felt they were both.

"All's well that ends well," said Peter, echoing Richard's words to rally Paul.

"Quite so." Reverend Mother smiled. That gentle smile, which neither had seen for a long time, made Peter uneasy, and terrified Paul. "Now I hope what I have to tell you will not surprise you too much, Sisters." The smile ended. Reverend Mother became grave. "These are, we all know, very hard times."

Cautiously, Peter said: "Yes, Reverend Mother." Paul was

too paralysed to speak.

"And the Order of Grace, naturally, is feeling the—the pinch." Delicately the colloquialism tripped off Reverend Mother's tongue. "I have received a communication from our Mother House in Dublin informing me that the Order can no longer afford to support two separate establishments in Ballykeen."

She smiled at them again and returned to contemplation of her restful hands. Paul gazed agonisedly at Peter and was frightened to see that she had suddenly shrunk and faded. Her shoulders seemed narrower; she looked, thought Paul, all at once bewildered and lost in a lost world, *old*. But when Peter spoke, her voice was unaltered.

"You mean the Order won't support the Workhouse any longer, Reverend Mother?"

Reverend Mother corrected her politely.

"It cannot afford to, Sister."

"We don't cost much, Reverend Mother."

"Indeed, you have always been most economical, Sister Peter. But at present, I'm afraid every penny counts with the Order. We are building a second chapel in Dublin which we hope to dedicate to Blessed Mother Assumpta if His Holiness thinks fit to place her name on the Calendar, which we have reason to believe may be soon, and here in Ballykeen we need to begin renovating the school premises immediately the boarders leave for the summer holidays. Not being a wealthy order, we are not finding it easy to finance these projects."

Paul was stunned into complete blankness by this flow of language. Peter knotted her fingers together tightly.

"We could economise even more, Reverend Mother."

Reverend Mother laughed softly.

"Dear me! Sisters, we would not wish you to starve yourselves. Or," she said, humorously, "poor Sarah. And you must remember there are rates—electricity—oh! so many

incidentals that all mount up." Paul saw Peter glance at the portrait of Blessed Mother Assumpta and visibly gather her forces to play this trump card. But, before Peter could speak, Reverend Mother grabbed her ace and played it first. "If our dear Blessed Mother Assumpta had made an endowment for the Workhouse, of course matters would be very different. But as it is, you have nothing whatever with which to reproach yourselves. You have carried out our dear Blessed Mother Assumpta's wishes as far as possible. We have *all* tried to ensure that they were carried out until force—brute economic force," said Reverend Mother, almost gaily, "made it impossible." She paused. "I think everyone will appreciate that." She paused again. "I think Ballykeen, that is so proud of our holy Foundress, will appreciate that, particularly when it knows the difficulty is partly due to our efforts to build a chapel in her honour." Peter stared at her. Reverend Mother stared back. Then her lips parted in yet another gentle smile. "I really think, Sisters, that Ballykeen will understand that no one is at fault that you must leave the Workhouse." She rose and Peter and Paul stood up silently in front of her. "You will take care of Sarah here and we will take care of you. You are not so young as you were, Sisters, and you have earned a rest." She looked at them both. She said, slowly: "Please believe me, Sisters, we will be glad to have you back with us and we hope to make you happy."

Peter said, heavily: "Thank you, Reverend Mother." She made a movement to leave and stopped. "I suppose we may stay in the Workhouse while the money we have holds out?"

"If you prefer, certainly."

"I think we might be able to manage for another two weeks. There are arrangements to be made. There's our dog——"

Paul made an odd, choking noise and turned it into a cough.

"Bring him with you," said Reverend Mother, quickly.

Tim came to meet them half-way down Workhouse Hill. Paul choked over him again. He was so obviously no convent dog. Then she choked over the dear old Workhouse, with the archway waiting to welcome them in like, she thought, wildly, the gate of Heaven and said so to Peter. Peter had hardly spoken at all during the walk through Ballykeen and Paul had respected the silence of a sorrow akin to her own, but now she saw that Peter was looking more cross than sad and also that she had broadened out and got her fine colour back. And when she said, sharply: "This is no time for fancy talk. Reverend Mother is a very clever woman. This is a time for thinking," it coursed like a blare of trumpets through Paul's veins and her heart leaped and said: "hal hal!"

"Oh, Peter! Do you think it's any use to think?"

She gripped the beads of the big rosary that hung from her waist until her fingers hurt. She saw that Peter also gripped hers, as both besought Blessed Mother Assumpta's aid in this terrible crisis.

"I know it's no use not to," said Peter. "God helps those that help themselves and you can be sure Blessed Mother Assumpta will follow His example."

Chapter Four

Sunday breakfasts for Mr. and Mrs. Joyce and week-end guests at the Cottage were rambling, dressing-gowned affairs of cups of tea or coffee and cigarettes. Jane detested these unsanctified, untidy Sabbaths. Strictly adhering to Godly practices, according to the done thing in Ballykeen, she herself breakfasted—correctly and punctually after Mass—on a corner of the kitchen table.

The kitchen was her favourite room. It had not been included in the general scheme of decoration—for a short while, indeed, Mrs. Joyce had enthused about open turf fires, hearth-wheels, pot-ovens and roasting-spits, but had realised in time that if she installed these she would be left maidless to use them herself—so it still had its floral red linoleum, pink window curtains, two blue Woolworth vases, out-dated picture calendar of a kitten with a ball that was too pretty ever to be discarded, and creaking rocking-chair, as well as its electric cooker. The word for the kitchen, thought Jane, was 'cosy', and it called aloud for a dear old cosy body who would potter about being very faithful to the family and constantly baking special treats for little Miss Jane. But all it had was Margaret.

Margaret did not suit it. It was difficult, thought Jane, taking the top off a boiled egg and studying her, to know where Margaret would suit. But there seemed to be so many like her that, of course, they would suit one another.

"Looked at me enough, I hope?" said Margaret, sharply.

Jane said: "Yes."

"And I'll take none of your impudence, neither!"

Jane chewed silently. Margaret flounced around and broke

a cup. She was always in a particularly bad humour on Sundays. Jane knew why. Margaret might lie and thief and cook abominably and deport herself in a manner to cast grave doubts on her virginity, but she resented the irreligious backsliding of her employers which was brought freshly to her notice this day each week.

"Shouldn't stay here at all, reely," she said now. She threw the fragments of china in a bucket and threw a crumpled newspaper on top to hide them. "Atheists!"

"No," said Jane. "Agnostics."

"What's those? One of them new religions?"

There was fanaticism in Margaret's glare. It was obvious that another religion would be even less acceptable to her than none. Jane said, pacifyingly: "It's Greek. It means—well, it means just people who don't know."

"Couldn't they ask?" said Margaret reasonably. "Anyone could tell 'em." She sat down and reached for the teapot. "This is no house for a decent Catholic girl. Pagan, that's what it is. Not that I'm saying a word against yourself, Jane," she added, kindly. "You're all right." She put three spoonfuls of sugar into her cup. "I won't be long more here, anyway."

Jane said: "Oh, dear me!" When you had a maid, it was sometimes difficult to know whether it was worse to have none or to have the kind of one you had; but when you had no maid, you realised then, Jane remembered, that that was worse. "England?"

Margaret nodded importantly. Irish girls like Margaret, Jane knew, invariably went to England, where English mistresses seemed glad to get them. This odd fact made Jane feel that, in spite of the English women's magazines, there must be something peculiar about English housekeeping.

"There's no life in Ballykeen." Margaret stirred her tea vigorously. "Though, mind you——" She leaned forward confidentially—"I met a lovely chap at the dance last night.

A reel toff. Asked right off if he could see me home." She giggled. "A fast worker! He didn't get what he wanted, though."

Jane asked, absently: "What did he want?"

"Never you mind! You'll know soon enough."

Jane knew already. Her sex education had been imparted by healthy-minded, clinical little booklets and supplementary talks from her mother. Jane considered the whole business tiresome and, surely, uncomfortable. She supposed when she was older it would all seem different; she certainly hoped so, because of the husband and children and so on that she intended to have. Not wishing to shock Margaret further on a Sunday, she inquired, civilly: "Did he like your dress?"

"Me new blue? It looked lovely. I wore——" Margaret hesitated. She had worn Mrs. Joyce's coral necklace with her new blue. Jane knew she had. "I wore beads over the bony bit of my front. I think he thought I was a toff meself."

Jane smiled politely. She had reached the white of her egg and was wishing that Margaret would go away and do some work and leave her to eat this nicest part in peace. But Margaret reached again for the teapot and then Mrs. Joyce, in her old grey housecoat, came in waving a coffee-pot.

"Oh, Margaret! Do you think we could have a little more coffee?"

Margaret put milk in her tea before getting up and taking the coffee-pot without a word. Mrs. Joyce looked at her nervously.

"And I was wondering if we could have lunch at one o'clock?"

"It's not so easy to get lunch early with breakfast going on all the morning."

"No, but—well, of course, it's only coffee—well, as near to one as you can. And you'll make mint sauce, won't you? You make it so nicely."

"There's no mint," said Margaret, gladly.

"Oh, but—with lamb— I thought I said——"

"I can't think of everything. I've only one pair of hands."

"Oh, well—I suppose gravy." No one, thought Jane, gloomily finishing the white of her egg which she hadn't been able to enjoy properly at all, could say Margaret made gravy so nicely. "And will you bring the coffee when it's ready, J.J. darling?" said Mrs. Joyce, and escaped.

When Jane brought the coffee to the sitting-room, Brenda and Hilary Farrell were there with her father and mother. Jane thought they all looked tired and not very well washed. Mrs. Joyce was being humorous about her recent encounter with Margaret.

"She simply terrifies me."

"With Margaret's type," said Jane, "it would probably be better to order her to do a thing instead of asking her."

Brenda laughed. She had an abrupt brittle laugh and a voice to match.

"Quite the little Fory, aren't we?"

"Actually," said Jane, filling the coffee-cups, "I don't take much interest in politics yet because it's so long until I'll have a vote. But Margaret is economics, and that goes on all the time." Courteously she addressed Brenda, whose subject this was. "You explained once that even spending my pocket money was economics. Well, we pay Margaret for doing her job, so I don't think we also should have to beg her to do it."

Brenda looked at her for a moment before turning to the others.

"Seems to me you've got something rather special here, Fred and Alice."

Mr. Joyce smiled at Jane.

"We think so."

"Sugar, Mummy?"

"Must you, darling? It makes me feel," said Mrs. Joyce, resignedly, "as if I were dug out of a pyramid."

"It has that meaning, too, of course," Jane agreed, "but the other is far commoner. Mummy is the usual name nowadays for a mother, so it really shouldn't make you feel like a preserved corpse." She appealed to Hilary, who was nearest to her. "Should it?"

"No." He also looked at her for a moment without speaking. "You *have* got something here, you know, Fred."

"One could foresee that even from early days." Brenda laughed her brittle laugh at Jane. "It used be Fred and Alice then, though, not Daddy and Mummy, if I remember."

"She's going to the convent school now," said Mrs. Joyce. Brenda and Hilary spoke together.

"My dear Alice! A convent school!"

"Isn't it a mistake——"

Their Maria Monk expressions made Jane say quickly: "I like it."

"We think it's not fair to keep an only child at home. She needs companionship. We don't allow her to board there."

Mr. Joyce said, defensively: "We have her here altogether at week-ends to counteract any—undesirable influences."

"It's dangerous. A clear, logical mind," said Brenda, emphatically, "is such a rarity that one wants to keep it uncontaminated until it's fully developed. Don't you think, Hilary, that place in County Meath where the young Croftons are going——?"

"It's only just been opened, Alice. Co-educational, undenominational. The Archbishop's bound to declare it as much a mortal sin to send one's child there as to Trinity College, of course, Fred."

They all laughed. Jane stared at them. Brenda said: "Perhaps, at the moment, *pas devant les enfants*, do you think?" and Jane, whose French was the best in Third Grade, politely made herself look blank. In the ensuing silence,

there was a soft tap at the door. Jane opened it and let Pompey in.

He entered cautiously, with his nose and the crooked tip of his well-bred tail twitching. Plainly, he had come merely to see if the visitors were still here. He glanced swiftly around, screamed and went out. Jane followed him.

The rest of that day was dreadful. Jane and Pompey kept away as much as possible, but they had to eat, they had good appetites, and Margaret, increasingly ill-tempered with the extra work of visitors, would not allow them in her kitchen. At lunch, when the gravy was quite extraordinarily lumpy and the peas almost raw, there was more talk of that school in County Meath. It was rather careful talk, but Jane kept quiet and listened hard and Pompey, with his plate on the floor by her chair, kept quiet, too. She told him about the school afterwards; telling things to Pompey helped to get them clear to herself. It was a place where the children were fed on a balanced diet ("Most likely veg.," said Jane, and Pompey groaned) and swam all through winter in a beautiful, heated swimming-pool and played any games they wished, or none, if that's what they wished. They also did, or didn't, do lessons as they wished. The staff were all University graduates and very civilised; one was a negro. There were dramatic classes and ballet classes and lectures on world affairs. It was the sort of place, she told Pompey, that turned you out tolerant and cultured and intelligent, utterly unlike everyone else. "Progs," said Jane, who sometimes read the *New Statesman* when she had no decent book, and Pompey punched her twice on the cheek with his paw and then walked around the garden, growling and grumbling incessantly.

At supper they had abandoned *pas devant les enfants* and were all actually *telling* her about the school and how much she'd love to be there. Jane said she wouldn't. They told her some more about it. Jane said she'd prefer the convent.

They were getting almost angry when Mrs. Joyce said, suddenly: "*I know what's wrong, don't I, J.J.?* But even though you won't be able to come home for week-ends, Fred and I will go to see you quite often."

Mr. Joyce smiled fondly.

Jane was careful not to hurt feelings, if possible, but things had gone so far she had to speak out. She said she wouldn't mind not coming home for week-ends. She said she'd like being a boarder all the time at the Grace convent. She said she didn't want to leave the convent, that was all.

Hilary said, significantly: "You see the influence already?" and everyone nodded portentously. Jane finished her cold lamb and ate coloured blancmange that was as lumpy as the lunch-time gravy, and Pompey, at her feet, called for more meat instead of the slimy, sticky stuff. Jane, listening, frowned down at him. Mrs. Joyce said she would go to County Meath to interview the headmaster about the September term. Brenda, who knew him, said she'd tell him about Jane: Jane was exactly the type they hoped for. "A brilliant child," said Brenda, softly; out of the corner of her mouth, "will have every chance to develop freely there." Pompey deliberately upset his saucer and flicked some blancmange fastidiously from his paws while Jane went to get him more lamb from the sideboard.

After supper, the four, still chatting about County Meath, went off to the Spa Hotel. Last night, Jane knew, they had drunk matily in a quaint little pub where one met only the lower orders (though one wasn't supposed to call them that). The lower orders (or whatever one called them when one couldn't call them what they were) had been, as usual, according to the Joyces and the Farrells, witty and keen and amusing. Tonight, at the Spa bar, the middle class (one could use that name because it was, somehow, funny and not snob-bish) would be amusing to the Joyces and the Farrells without meaning to be. Jane drew a deep breath of relief as the

four backs receded down the Cottage path. She thought it was lucky for the poor lower orders that they wouldn't have their drinking ruined tonight. She wasn't concerned about the middle class; they could look after themselves.

Soon afterwards, Margaret's back, dressed in red taffetas, went down the path, too. It shouldn't have gone. Jane was supposed never to be left alone in the Cottage in the evening, but whenever Mr. and Mrs. Joyce went out, so did Margaret. She generally gave Jane a bar of chocolate or a few sweets for being such a right little sport as not to let on about these illicit outings, and Jane kindly accepted the unnecessary bribe simply to ease Margaret's conscience. It was the purest joy to have the Cottage cleared of all but herself and Pompey.

This evening, however, both were too upset after their nerve-racking day fully to appreciate their peaceful solitude. Pompey was haggard about the whiskers and Jane's forehead felt tight. They needed distraction. As soon as they were alone, Jane got Pompey's new lead from its box and fixed it on. (It was pale blue to match his eyes, studded with tiny brasses like a miniature harness and became him splendidly) and they set off for the Workhouse.

Seen from the Cottage, the Workhouse had looked very big; once inside the archway, it seemed enormous. Huge, grey buildings stretched on every side and rose up to the sky, shutting out the sunshine so that the vast courtyard lay all in shadow, and everywhere hundreds of small windows, some barred, some glassless, all staring, fixed Jane and Pompey with unfriendly eyes. Through some of the broken upper windows, swallows skimmed in and out, strangely and horribly resembling, in these grim surroundings, bats instead of birds. There were quite a number of doors, unpainted, unwelcoming. It was a distracting place, all right, but maybe not helpfully. Jane glanced at Pompey, but he appeared calm. Then he yawned and stretched and cleverly mewed at a respectable door flanked by proper curtained windows.

This door was opened by a small, round lay sister. She was cheerful and pleasant, but surprised to see them. Jane said they had come to visit Mrs. Slaney; she said people did, didn't they? The lay sister said, yes, but it was a bit late now. It was only nine o'clock, but Jane supposed Mrs. Slaney, being so old, would be asleep already. The lay sister said no, old people didn't sleep much and agreed with Jane that it was nicer for them to be awake and know they were living instead of wasting the short time they had in sleeping. Then she said that Jane might as well come in anyway, and to mind the cat.

When she brought Jane into a room where two other nuns rose from their chairs and came forward (Sisters Peter and Paul, Jane knew), Jane understood why she had mentioned about minding the cat. A small, white dog, asleep on an arm-chair, woke up, jumped down, stiffened and, showing all his teeth in a soundless snarl, began to stalk towards Pompey on rigid legs. There was no need to mind Pompey, not against a thing that size, rarely, indeed, against a thing any size. The tall, thin nun caught her breath sharply, but Pompey just stood. Slowly, menacingly, the white dog continued to approach Pompey and Pompey, unmoving, alert, waited. Then the dog had passed by Pompey and was strolling casually on to the door, as if he had simply intended to take exercise, and then strolled casually back, blatantly unaware of Pompey's presence and jumped on to his chair and fell asleep again.

The tall nun let out her breath on a gusty sigh of relief.

"Such a clever cat! Tim hopes to frighten them, you know, by looking ferocious. If they run, he'll run after them, but he'll never tackle them if they stand. So, if they *do* stand, he has to pretend he hasn't seen them."

Jane nodded.

"Saving his pride, of course." She stooped and unleashed Pompey. "Actually, Pompey is a good fighter. He could beat

any dog. Except, maybe, an Alsatian. I wouldn't let him try with an Alsatian."

"Tim," said the tall nun, proudly, "beat an Alsatian yesterday. He has a different method with dogs. He flattens right down on his stomach with his legs stuck out and very, very slowly pulls himself along the ground towards them—rather like a snake."

"Or a starfish?"

"Oh yes. I never thought of that. Unnatural and dreadful, anyway. So the dogs think he'll do something terrible when he reaches them, and they nearly always turn tail at the last moment. Most fortunate, because Tim *is* small."

"Very small compared to an Alsatian," said Jane, regarding him respectfully.

The short, square nun coughed.

"The Alsatian didn't exactly turn tail, Paul."

"He stepped aside," said Sister Paul firmly.

Pompey flexed his back paws, padded to an arm-chair, leaped up, curled like a snail and went to sleep. Worried, Jane saw there was now only one arm-chair for two nuns. She took a step forward and stopped.

"Would you be so kind as to put him down for me, please?" She addressed Sister Paul, who had a face most people would like immediately, since most people like horses. "He doesn't care for me to do it."

"Tim," said Sister Paul, enthusiastically, "is *exactly* the same."

"It's their pride," said Sister Peter. She had a nice face, too, though one wouldn't realise it so quickly as with Sister Paul. "Full of it, they all are. I don't know why it must be pandered to."

"It's so easy to break their spirit. An upright chair," said Sister Paul, going towards one, "improves the posture."

By the time they were seated, Sister Paul and Jane having their postures improved and Sister Peter made to take the

arm-chair, all were fully introduced. The nuns had heard in the convent of Jane.

"I believe," said Sister Paul, "you write wonderful essays for your age. Indeed, for any age." Reluctantly, Jane admitted she was good at English. Knotting and unknotting her bony fingers, Sister Paul leaned forward. "Sometimes I write poetry—but not very well."

Jane was miserably disappointed. It seemed you met this kind everywhere; you went to the Workhouse to try to forget them and here they were before you! She was so disappointed that she forgot to be careful of her face, and Sister Paul asked, with mild astonishment: "Don't you like poetry?"

Jane said she did. She paused and looked at them. She had known them only for about ten minutes, but somehow she felt that with these you could speak as you thought.

"I like poetry and books and music and painting. I like all those very much. But I don't like the ones who do them. Not the ones I've met up to now. I like best," said Jane, hopelessly, "ordinary people."

"You needn't mind me," Sister Paul said kindly, "I'm ordinary." She frowned consideringly. "But I don't think you are."

"I'm trying to be."

"Mightn't you—Jane, mightn't you find it dull?"

"I want to be let be dull. Other children," said Jane, passionately, "are let be dull, so why not me?"

"What you mean," Sister Peter said, "is that you want to be let alone. Well, it's hard to have that at any age, and particularly at your age."

She understood, of course. She sounded so sensible that it had a queer effect on Jane after all that County Meath talk; it almost made her cry. But when Sister Paul said: "Now we'll get Borgia to bring you a glass of milk and a slice of Sarah Slaney's one hundred and fourth birthday cake," she remembered her manners and said apologetically: "I'm sorry

for coming here so late. I forgot about nuns going to bed early. But, you see, it was a worrying day and I felt a new place would be a change for my mind."

"We're worried, too," Sister Paul said, "and we're glad you've come because you're a change for us."

Jane, still apologetic for causing all the trouble of milk and cake being brought, and with Pompey immovably occupying what was surely Sister Paul's chair, continued to explain.

"People were trying to send me where I didn't want to go."

"That's odd," said Sister Peter, "because that's exactly what people are trying to do to us."

She said it grimly, as if she could battle out. Jane was greatly encouraged. Maybe she could battle out, too. But Sister Paul's dark eyes rolled and she said, in a frightened voice: "Say a prayer for us tonight, Jane."

Jane said sadly: "It wouldn't be any use me praying for you. I do all the proper things, Mass and so on, but I'm not a bit sure about God yet, though I'm trying to be because it's ordinary."

Sister Paul showed the whites of her eyes as if she were going to buck or shy. Sister Peter put her hands on her knees and stared at Jane. Then she grunted and stood up.

"You can pray, whether or which. It may do good, and it can't do harm."

Relieved, Jane said that was reasonable.

"It is," said Sister Peter, "and now we'll go and see Sarah."

Sarah Slaney reminded Jane of a tortoise. She had the same kind of neck and eyes. She thought Sarah a most interesting sight. But Sarah did not find either Jane or Pompey interesting. She said Pompey was like a big, yellow rat. Jane explained that he was Siamese.

"Them foreign animals," said Sarah, chauvinistically, "are trash." Then she said that children shouldn't be brought bothering a poor old woman, and if Peter and Paul knew

what 'twas like to have ten or eleven of 'em maybe they'd have more consideration.

Sister Paul, gently indignant, said Jane wouldn't bother anyone. She said Jane was a very intelligent child.

Sarah sneered.

"She'd need to be. She's very plain."

Jane could feel Pompey trembling with rage in her arms, so she was glad when the visit ended there. But it had certainly been stimulating and distracting.

The courtyard, despite the flickering swallows and the shadows and the bleak, grey stones, was harmless now with Sisters Peter and Paul standing beside her. They told her, even before she asked, to come again; they told her she could come as often as she pleased. She thanked them. She said she thought she would want to come quite often. She said good-bye then and went down the hill to the Cottage, thinking, with Pompey at her heels, very quiet, probably thinking also.

Chapter Five

The arrival of Miss Byrne promised to make this the pleasantest summer ever for Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell. This time of year, when their circle was widened by old acquaintances coming for the waters, was always a vast improvement on the other seasons, but never such an improvement as now. For Miss Byrne's presence had induced a brighter air even in the Guest House itself, with the crippled lady guest moving faster, the myopic one more alert and the dull one almost intelligent, and, outside it, Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell, eager to display their new friend to Ballykeen, brought her visiting everywhere and shared, as her sponsors, in her social success. They were puffed with pride to be the first to show the unsophisticated town a real London actress, and she did them credit by being so obviously accustomed to the best society. Even in the Spa Hotel (which was very expensive) it was easily apparent that Miss Byrne was accustomed to bigger and better hotels. These days, Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell passed in and out of the hotel not meekly, as two ageing convent-lodged widows, but almost contemptuously.

They passed in and out often over the week-end, for Major Magner and Mr. Medlicott had arrived earlier than usual for the annual rehabilitation of their livers. Once upon a time, Major Magner and Mr. Medlicott might, respectively, have married Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell if these had not married their deceased husbands instead. In the event, the two gentlemen had remained bachelors, but they were still great lady-killers. Their amorous, but innocent, inclinations

turned nowadays towards younger, indeed excessively young, ladies, but Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell noted with satisfaction that the introduction of Miss Byrne made a profound impression. At their second meeting, Major Wagner, always natty, had spruced himself up more than ever and Mr. Medlicott was twirling his moustache very meaningly.

"Damn fine woman," he said confidentially to Mrs. O'Donnell.

Mrs. O'Donnell said, primly, that Miss Byrne was a very nice person.

"Must have been a damn' pretty girl." He brooded in retrospective regret. "Got something still."

"Fine ankles," Major Wagner said confidentially to Mrs. Murphy. "Good style."

Mrs. Murphy said, airily: "Her clothes are models, of course."

"Can tell a story, too,. Haw, haw!" Mrs. Murphy knew which one he was recollecting. Mrs. O'Donnell and she (practised Bohemians now) had also enjoyed it. "Hell of a figure she must have had!" He pondered. "Got something still."

On Sunday night, Major Wagner was host at the hotel to the three ladies and his friend. Throughout dinner, the men vied with each other in their attentions to Miss Byrne. Mrs. O'Donnell thought they were being rather silly, but men often were at that age and Miss Byrne managed them well. Used to managing men, of course, thought Mrs. Murphy, thinking wistfully how pleasant it would have been if she herself had had a little more knowledge of that art before trying to manage Mr. Murphy. Neither was in the least jealous of the determined flirtation; Miss Byrne was theirs and they were merely lending her kindly and it made them feel almost youthful again to see their contemporary being ogled.

Watching Major Wagner essay a stiff sitting bow from the hips across the table, Mrs. Murphy ached for the poor men.

The waters weren't making much improvement and eyes *could* look like boiled gooseberries.

"I wish," said the Major, fatuously, "I could have seen you on the stage, Miss Byrne."

Miss Byrne gave her hoarse laugh.

"If you had, you'd have seen plenty."

Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell were on their second glass of champagne and, after a brief, startled pause, they laughed, too.

"Never too much," said Mr. Medlicott.

Mrs. Murphy took hold. In a lady-like way, she asked: "Were you in musical comedy, Miss Byrne?"

"More or less. Do you think," said Miss Byrne, "you could call me Bessie? I'm not used to the other. It makes me feel a very ancient crone."

"You," said Mr. Medlicott, gallantly, "could never be really old."

"Maybe not," said Bessie, "with this wretched heart of mine, but I mean to make a damn' good shot at it, all the same."

Mr. Medlicott looked disconcerted. Pleased, Mrs. O'Donnell said, gently: "But you feel well now, don't you—Bessie?"

"Too good. When I feel too good, I talk too much. You must stop me if I do."

"We've had long enough," said Mrs. O'Donnell, decisively, "of trying to stop people being silent."

Bessie frowned curiously at them both.

"You're not what I expected you'd be." In a surprised voice, she said: "You're not what you *should* be. I *like* you."

Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell smiled shyly and warmly at each other.

The Major, who had been a proper British Army one, all over the world, and not an Irish Army one, never setting a foot outside the country nor hearing a shot fired in anger,

now plunged into a long, pointless anecdote about Cyprus. Before he had finished, it appeared Bessie had been there. It appeared Bessie had been in a lot of places; Monte Carlo, the French and Italian Rivas, and probably a great many more which she did not think of mentioning. Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell communicated in happy glances. This was their friend; this was the travelled woman of the world who had chosen *them*. Dizzy with champagne and elation and haughtily ungrateful for all the condescending kindness shown to two aged penurious widows in past summers, they bore her away at ten o'clock without bothering to make any definite arrangement for a future meeting with their one-time cavaliers. Because of Bessie, the widows were in general demand now and could pick and choose.

On the way home, Bessie said, suddenly: "Men are necessary occasionally but they are *never* restful. At our age, we can afford to be restful."

The three old ladies nodded at one another and went on contentedly.

At this late hour, the door of the Guest House was bolted and had to be specially opened for them; tonight, it was Reverend Mother herself who welcomed them back. When they told her how wicked and dissipated they had been she laughed and said it was very naughty to be leading Miss Byrne astray.

Next day, Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell generously brought Bessie to the Workhouse as a treat for Peter and Paul. She was quiet today, and seemed tired. After a little while, she said she had a slight headache and would like to walk around outside by herself for a few minutes, if she might. Soon Paul followed her out and saw her, at the far end of the courtyard, walking slowly and stopping now and again to lay her hand against the walls. Hastily, Paul went towards her.

"Are you weak?"

"Weak? Oh, no." Bessie sounded vague. "A headache—perhaps."

"I thought I saw you leaning against the wall."

"Leaning?" She sounded very vague. "Oh, this?" She put the palm of her hand to the wall. She said, strangely: "I was touching the stones."

"You should come in and rest now. Your friends," said Paul, starting to lead the way in, for really Miss Byrne did not seem well, "have been telling us all about you."

"Hardly," said Bessie, "all."

She made no attempt to move. She certainly looked as if she should be sitting down. Paul stopped.

"We want to hear about those places you've been to. At least," said Paul, candidly, "I don't think Peter would be interested but I am. I don't ever want to leave here but still I wish I could see the whole wonderful world—just once." She clasped her hands and looked beyond Bessie to China or Peru. "It's an odd thing."

"Not odd," said Bessie. "I understand. And I'll tell you all I can, sometime. But what I want to tell you now is that wherever I was I was seeing——" Cruelly, she smote the wall with her open hand—"this!"

"What?" said Paul, blankly.

"This Workhouse," said Bessie. Paul stared. Bessie stared back unsmiling. "I was born in Ballykeen. When I was a child I used to be brought here to visit my grandmother. We couldn't afford her keep at home—we could hardly keep ourselves. I saw the plain black coffins going out on common carts to the common grave without mourner or priest. I grew up knowing that the most important thing in life was to be safe from the dread of this place."

Paul glanced back. But there was no sign of Peter, sitting gossiping inside, thought Paul, unfairly, just when she was needed.

Bessie said, quickly: "I'm sorry if I've worried you. I

shouldn't have spoken as I did. But I felt I wanted to tell someone. And it's done me good."

"If it has, that's all that matters. But as a general rule," said Paul, earnestly, looking at the parlour window, "the less talk, the less trouble."

Bessie looked at the parlour window, too, and laughed and nodded.

"Poor old dears! I'll keep quiet about Grannie." Almost caressingly now, she touched the stones again. "I could never understand until this moment why I wanted to come back to Ballykeen after half a century away, but now I know. I wanted to see the Workhouse again without being afraid of it." With her clenched fist, she hit the wall. "Well, I'm not afraid. That's finished. The hell with it! I'm safe."

When they returned to the parlour, Peter said she knew of an excellent stomach powder. Bessie thanked her and said her headache was gone. Paul smiled a small, complacent smile. Psychology or physiology was sometimes an issue between Peter and herself, but this time Paul knew she was right. What ailed Miss Byrne was soul, not stomach.

However, both these seemed in sound condition with Bessie for the remainder of her visit. She took tea and chatted gaily and praised the hundred and fourth birthday cake. When they stood up to go to see Sarah, Paul was at ease about her once more.

Sarah had been prettied up by Borgia with blue ribbons and lace and dentures but, as always with visitors, she looked singularly malevolent. She listened impatiently while Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell exclaimed in delight at her appearance of health and vigour and asked abruptly if they had brought presents. Proudly, Mrs. Murphy gave her a parcel.

"I knew exactly what you wanted. Snuff, Sarah!"

"Huh!" Sarah's nose twitched like a rabbit's. "Is it Old Irish?"

"They said in the shop it was the best."

"Old Irish is the best." She tore off the paper and scowled. "It's not Old Irish." Her beady eyes slid sideways. "What's in that white bag *you* have?"

"Grapes," Mrs. O'Donnell said, nervously, and handed them over. Sarah handed them back.

"D'ye want me to get me death with the gallops? An' them pips," said Sarah, indignantly, "is right down dangerous for 'pendicites."

Peter collected the discarded offerings. She said, calmly: "Sarah will enjoy these later on."

Sarah's attention was fixed now on Bessie, standing at the foot of the bed.

"That's a nice hat. I had a hat that shape once," said Sarah, dreamily, "only pink. With a rose. 'Twas an old one the curate's housekeeper handed down to me for Mass a' Sundays." Sighing, she rested on her pillows. "I dare say, bein' new, you didn't think to bring me nothin'?"

"I'll bring you something next time."

"I likes best a drop of the hard stuff."

Bessie looked inquiringly at Peter. Peter nodded.

"I'll bring you that." She opened her handbag. "I should give you a present now. I'm sorry I didn't know. Would you like this?"

On the counterpane beside Sarah she laid a miniature silver mirror, studded with brilliants and with a spray of lilac exquisitely enamelled on the back. Everyone caught their breaths as Sarah reached for it and Peter got ready to field the beautiful little object. But all Sarah did was to touch it with one finger and ask, wonderingly: "For me?"

Bessie said: "Yes."

"For me!" She took it up carefully. She held it in both hands and turned it from front to back and all the time her twisted fingers were moving over it. "'Tis lovely. Isn't it lovely, Peter? All shinin' an' carved an' sparklin'. Look at

the sparkle, Paul! An' the lovely little flower! The lovely little flower!" She gazed around with misted eyes. In a small, hoarse voice, she said: "No one never give me such a pretty thing in me life. No one never give me any pretty thing at all."

Worried, Peter and Paul watched this dramatic sea-change. And then, to their great relief, Sarah returned to her familiar self and snarled at them.

"No tryin' to sneak it offa me, you Peter and Paul! 'Tis mine." She gloated again briefly over the mirror and then studied Bessie carefully, putting her head to one side and the other. Finally, she nodded. "You're a change from the usual crowd of holy dowds I have creepin' about me." Her disgusted glance around included lay and religious in this dismal category. Suddenly she gave an admiring cackle. "I'd say you're no better than you should be!"

"Same to you!" said Bessie.

While everyone else smiled amiably, they hooted together with delight.

Melly Brown closed and stamped the last envelope and collected the pile of bills from Dr. Jim's desk. Then she took two aspirins and went home.

She walked in the light of evening through golden streets teeming with hypochondriacs. Forcibly reminded by these profitable hordes of the past three hours' work, she averted her eyes from one determinedly fragile spinster who would discover tomorrow morning exactly what her last bout of soothing illness had cost her, and found herself instead contemplating her employer's closest friend, Mr. Higgins. Murmuring a greeting, she hastily averted her eyes from him, too, but he cheerily barred her way.

"Off to enjoy yourself for the evening, Miss Brown?"

"No," said Melly. "Back to my lodgings. To bed, with a headache."

"We can't have you doing that. Bad advertisement for Dr. Jim. Well, if he won't prescribe for you," said Mr. Higgins, reprovingly, "I will," and took her elbow and led her into the Spa Hotel.

The second gin (or the aspirin) made her feel better. With the third, she felt tough and sophisticated. She was Miss Melisande Brown, with a good job and a good salary and why the hell should she worry? She asked Mr. Higgins and he said why the hell should she?

"Principles. Those," said Melly, solemnly, "are what I'm full of. It's all Daddy's fault."

Mr. Higgins said everyone had them. They were a nuisance but what could you do? He had them himself.

Melly studied him through a slight mist. He had a charmingly sincere voice; it was bad luck for him that his appearance didn't match it.

"It helps," she said, "to look like Dr. Jim. Boyish. It helps enormously." She reflected for a few sad moments. "Isn't it unfair that boyishness in a man of fifty should be appealing while girlishness in a woman——"

Mr. Higgins said he didn't like girlishness even in girls. He told her to finish up her drink. When she did, she found another on the table. She frowned at this one.

"One more won't do you any harm," said Mr. Higgins. "Dr. Jim's hard-working secretary is entitled to some relaxation. That's the girl! Head all right?"

Melly shook it testingly and nodded.

"It was probably psychosomatic."

"And what on earth," asked Mr. Higgins, "have you got to be psychosomatic about?"

"I don't know." Melly tilted her glass and swirled around her gin very neatly and cleverly. She said, abruptly: "I don't care for the Sancta Maria."

"I'm not too keen on the Matron—that Magee woman—myself," said Mr. Higgins. "Nose too long."

"Her nose doesn't matter."

"Then what *does*? Come on!" said Mr. Higgins, coaxingly.
"Tell Uncle David!"

Melly stared at Uncle David. It steadied her.

"Her chin."

"Her—— Oh, I see."

He continued to chat idly and amusingly about Mrs. Magee's chin while a fourth gin appeared beside Melly. She took a second searching, steadying look at Uncle David, finished the drink with almost unmannerly haste, chided herself aloud for the bills still lying unposted in her handbag, thanked Mr. Higgins and removed herself from him as fast as she could.

Outside, walking rapidly towards Ocean View, she drew in long draughts of fresh air. Soon she realised that, unaccustomed to gin except in small doses, she had miscalculated the effects of fresh air on it. She kept on moving rapidly over ground that had become extraordinarily springy, and moved right on past Ocean View and found herself floating up Workhouse Hill and on to the top and in under the Workhouse archway. When she was in a room with two nuns gazing at her in obvious astonishment, she came, in some degree, to her senses.

"You're Peter and Paul, aren't you? I know you from seeing you in town. I'm Melisande Brown, Melly Brown, Dr. Jim's secretary." She swayed, balanced skilfully on the rolling floor, and muttered thoughtfully: "It was that last gin."

Peter said, unemotionally: "How do you do!" Nervously, the other one said: "Won't you sit down?"

"I'm drunk but I hope you won't mind. I don't do it often—actually, I've never done it before. It's just as well it happened because I'd never have come here in cold blood. And I want to talk to you. Everyone talks to you, don't they? Since Daddy died I have no one I can talk to and I *must*

talk to somebody. You see," said Melly, wretchedly, "I'm miserable."

"No need for that," said Peter, briskly. "Whatever it is, we'll fix it."

"Sit down," said Paul and led her towards a chair.

Melly blinked.

"Nice little dogs."

"Oh, dear me, dear me!" said Paul and pushed her into the chair and hurried to the door calling: "Borgia! Borgia!" Then she came back and sat down beside Melly on one side and Peter sat on the other and Melly felt safe. She shut her eyes.

When she opened them, Peter was pouring coffee and Paul was offering sandwiches and the small, round lay sister that had let Melly in was ordering her to eat it all up, now, because there was nothing as bad as an empty stomach for making people dizzy. She waited until Melly had taken the first bite and then nodded and beamed and went out.

Melly put down the sandwich.

"I'm sorry for coming here like this."

"Well," Peter said, "you said you'd never have come any other way so maybe it's all for the best." She added, severely: "Not that I approve of women drinking, mind you!"

"She said it was the first time, Peter."

"They all make excuses, Paul."

"It really was," said Melly. "I met Mr. Higgins. He'd corrupt anyone. Only for him, Dr. Jim would probably be full of ideals. Just full of 'em—like me."

A nun coughed. Melly couldn't be sure which. She looked from one to the other accusingly.

"I know you don't like Dr. Jim. Everyone knows that. It's very uncharitable of you." Neither nun spoke. "Don't you realise there's a place in medicine for the placebo? Whosoever giveth a bottle of coloured water in My name——"

The horse-faced one drew a sharp breath. The other one said: "Drink your coffee."

"Everyone loves Dr. Jim." Swivelling her head, Melly stared at each long and defiantly. "I love him. Mrs. Mackenzie loved him. She loved him so much she left him all her money. I nursed her. He sent me specially to the Sancta Maria to nurse her because I'm loyal and true. 'I love that man,' she'd say to me. 'It does me good just to see him.' " Melly stopped. "She couldn't have lasted long, anyway."

"No one," said the square-faced one (Peter, that was), "was surprised when she lasted a little shorter."

Melly swung around on her.

"And what exactly do you mean by that?"

"What I said."

Melly said, doubtfully: "H'm!" She took a gulp of coffee. "Well, I suppose then you'd say what about Miss Hennebry?"

"I wouldn't," said Peter.

"She went peacefully," said Paul.

Melly laughed heartily. These nuns were very funny.

"They all do." She looked at them. They sat, their hands folded in their laps, wearing expressions of mild attention. They were dear old souls, dear old innocent cloistered souls, goddam enraging old souls. "For God's sake," she said, so furiously that the little white dog (there was only one now) lifted his head and barked, "stop sitting there looking holy! Anyone can go peacefully if they're kept full of dope." She choked. "Oh, what would Daddy have said!"

"If he were a sensible man," said Peter, "he'd say: 'Drink another cup of coffee.'" She refilled Melly's cup. "It's nice strong coffee."

Melly held the cup in two shaking hands. When she had emptied it, Peter took it from her. Melly lay back in her chair and shrank before Paul's anxious gaze.

"Peter, I'd say she's all right now, would you?"

"I think that last cup settled her."

Melly smiled wanly.

"You must both be very shocked. People talk stupidly when they're drunk. You wouldn't know that, because you wouldn't meet them when they're drunk."

"God help your innocence, child!" said Peter, pityingly. "If you expect us to be shocked by anything at our age, that is talking stupidly."

Melly stood up. She was almost steady. She was almost sober.

"Thank you for being so patient with me."

"There's no hurry," said Peter.

She smoothed her collar over her chest and looked questioningly at Melly.

"I think I'd better go now. And thank you very much again."

Paul sighed.

"I'm afraid you won't be easy until you've rid your mind of whatever's worrying you."

The voice was the voice of Paul, but the words were Daddy's. Melly whimpered but kept silence. Paul sighed again. Peter grunted. Both nuns stood up.

"Very well," said Peter. "If you prefer, go home now and sleep it off. I'll give you a soneryl, and a few spoonfuls of my stomach powder wouldn't be any harm, either." As a command rather than an invitation, she said: "Come and talk to us tomorrow."

Melly took a step towards the door. Gin had betrayed her but there'd be no more gin; she was his faithful Melly Brown once more and so much for the Workhouse Graces and Daddy! She shook hands and walked out quickly without giving Peter a chance to fuss around with her pill or powder, and wished, as she hurried across the courtyard, that she were down there with Mrs. Mackenzie where nothing disturbed but worms.

Chapter Six

One morning at breakfast Mr. Dillon put down his foot. He had put it down often before but never so firmly. Mrs. Dillon and Girlie were crushed.

The meal started with bright morning faces because Mr. Dillon's egg had been boiled for exactly four minutes by the clock instead of from three to six minutes by guess and by God. Mr. Dillon said the new girl didn't seem such a damned fool as the usual run. His wife, pleased with her treasure, smiled. Girlie, eating unbuttered toast, smiled too, dreamily.

A short period of domestic bliss followed. Mr. Dillon glanced at his newspaper, Mrs. Dillon continued to think thankfully of her new maid and Girlie dreamed on. Then the post was brought in.

Mr. Dillon went quickly through his uninteresting bundle of circulars, catalogues and bills. Mrs. Dillon read three times over a gossipy letter from an old school friend, living now in the wilds of Connemara. She put it down at last and raised her head to recount some of the best bits to William. William was glaring at Girlie. Mrs. Dillon gave a furtive peep in her daughter's direction, saw the thin sheets of paper covered with the too-familiar green writing scattered over Girlie's neglected toast, saw the rapt gaze bent upon the thin sheets still in Girlie's hand, heaved a resigned sigh and got on with her breakfast, remarking to William that it looked like turning out a nice day.

Mr. Dillon was not to be diverted by weather-lore. He threw his wife a brief, contemptuous look and gave vent to his feelings in a sudden roar that made both his womenfolk jump.

"Has that fellow nothing better to do that he can write screeds to you morning, noon and night?"

Gathering the sheets that had fallen from her hand, Girlie faced him, pale but proud.

"George writes to me in his spare time."

"He must have plenty of it." Mr. Dillon laughed very unpleasantly. "And you needn't pretend you're not meeting him often enough behind our backs for him to say all he wants, without a letter every day as well."

"Not behind your backs," said Girlie, brave with love. "I must meet him outside, because I won't be let meet him here."

"I never thought," said Mr. Dillon, between clenched teeth to the ceiling, "to see the day when a daughter of mine would conduct herself like a brazen little slut."

"William!" said his wife, abandoning all hope of peace and coming to her daughter's rescue.

"If you think——" Girlie choked. "I don't know how people can have such horrible minds. Sinks of iniquity!" said Girlie fiercely, and wept.

"Your father didn't mean anything," Mrs. Dillon said, and gave an angry warning look at William.

"Don't be a fool!" said Mr. Dillon. "She knows I didn't." To his gently wailing child, he said: "That crying nonsense will get you nowhere. I've been too soft up to now but I'll put up with it no longer. It turns my stomach," he declared, truthfully, "to see that fella's writing flaunted before my eyes every morning." With raging inconsequence, he demanded: "And why, in God's name, *green*?"

Girlie hiccupped.

"Because there's green ink in his pen, of course."

Mr. Dillon's face and neck began to swell. Mrs. Dillon coughed urgently.

"We'll talk about it afterwards. It's not good for your digestion at meals, William." She frowned and nodded at

the door. "Ellie will be wondering if she hears you shouting."

"Ellie," said Mr. Dillon, recklessly indifferent to well-boiled eggs, "can go to hell! It's a nice state of affairs if a man can't speak in his own house."

Girlie lowered the handkerchief with which she had been dabbing at her nose. Her eyes were quite dry again.

"Mother didn't mention speaking. Only shouting."

Her lips parted in that faint, superior smile which all parents have to endure occasionally from all children. As parents mercifully do, Mr. Dillon restrained his homicidal instincts but the effort left him so purple that his wife became really alarmed. She did not even reply when Mr. Dillon turned on her and told her that, apparently, she wasn't even able to teach her daughter manners, let alone anything else.

Once more Girlie smiled that foul smile.

"You can bully us now, but you won't be able to bully *me* when I'm twenty-one." She gave a compassionate glance at her mother. "*I'm* not married to you."

"No, thank God!" said Mr. Dillon, fervently.

"If you get as good a husband as I did," said Mrs. Dillon, stung, "you'll be luckier than you deserve."

Girlie sneered defiantly at both her enemies.

"I'd run away with George tomorrow, only he's too fine—too honourable—to let me."

"Too cute," said Mr. Dillon, sneering too. "What do you think you'd live on?"

"George lives, doesn't he?" inquired Girlie, indisputably.

Mr. Dillon agreed that unfortunately he did, and probably on his wits. All at once, Girlie became withdrawn and elevated and spoke down to them in slow, quiet tones.

"You don't understand him. You couldn't, because he's so different from anyone you've ever met. People in a place like Ballykeen couldn't possibly understand George. You think you're very important and I suppose you are, here, but

if you went anywhere else you'd be just nothing. You don't count in the world. But George will, one day. He'll be famous—and really rich, not what Ballykeen thinks rich, though of course that part of it doesn't matter to him." This time her smile was triumphant but tolerant and almost kind. "He's writing a novel."

"Good God!" said Mr. Dillon.

"What's it about?" asked Mrs. Dillon, interestedly.

"Irish middle-class life." Girlie stared wide-eyed into the glorious future. "He's putting Ballykeen in all its horror on the dissecting slab."

Mrs. Dillon realised with disappointment that George's novel could have no appeal for her. Mr. Dillon stared disgustedly at Girlie.

"Is it from him you get that rubbish talk?"

"Literate, do you mean? Naturally, since being with George, my horizons have broadened."

"If you've all finished," said Mrs. Dillon, desperately, "I'll ring for Ellie to clear."

Mr. Dillon banged his fist on the table.

"We'll stay here until I've said my say." Suddenly his attention was held by his daughter's plate. "Why are you eating your toast dry?"

"I'll take marmalade," said Girlie, pacifyingly, and reached for the dish.

"You'll take butter! I won't have this starving——"

"Dieting."

"*Starving*. Millions hungry all over the world and you turning up your nose at good food!"

Girlie pushed away the marmalade and deliberately crunched a bite of hard toast.

"Well, if I ate it, there'd be all the less for those others."

Mr. Dillon clenched his fist and swivelled his torso around rigidly to address his wife.

"I hope you're proud of your daughter?"

"When she's doing what you don't want," said Mrs. Dillon, "she's mine; when she's all right, she's yours."

Mr. Dillon composed himself with a mighty effort.

"I'll waste no more reasoning on the pair of you. It's time for me to be going to the Stores." Perceptibly, the strain at the table lessened. Mr. Dillon, making no attempt to rise, smiled grimly at his expectant family. Then, dramatically, he shot out his finger at Girlie. "And *you* are coming with me!"

"Me?" said Girlie, aghast.

Pleased and satisfied, Mr. Dillon lolled back in his chair.

"It's a year since you left school. I believe the idea was that you were to look around to see what you'd like to do. And what *have* you done?" Mr. Dillon paused. "Nothing."

"She helps me in the house," said Mrs. Dillon.

Mr. Dillon laughed gratingly.

"It can hardly be a full-time job for three women to run a house for one man." Mrs. Dillon murmured that that depended on the man. Mr. Dillon jerked his head away as if from a troublesome gnat. "You're going to learn the drapery trade now, my girl! We'll see if we can occupy that thing you call a mind with something other than young Pepper."

Girlie gazed piteously towards her mother for succour, but Mrs. Dillon was toying with her knife.

"You know I haven't any interest in the drapery, Daddy."

"You've interest enough in the money that comes out of it, I've noticed. And as I haven't a son to run the place when I'm gone——"

"I suppose you're suggesting that's *my* fault," said Mrs. Dillon, ready, like most, to take offence in the morning.

"Actually," said Girlie, "it's the male parent determines the sex of the child."

"How do they know that?" asked Mrs. Dillon, surprised.

"They don't," said Mr. Dillon, shocked, "and it's no way

for a young girl to talk, either. If that's what you're learning from your precious George——"

Girlie shrugged.

"I read it in a magazine."

"Then the less time you have to waste on such trash, the better!" said Mr. Dillon. "You start in to the drapery trade today, my girl, from A to Z. And when you have an honest day's work to do, maybe you'll need an honest meal to tackle it and not be worrying over your waist or your chest or whatever it is."

Girlie said, faintly: "Hips."

Mr. Dillon stood up.

"You can follow me in half an hour."

"I won't," said Girlic, passionately. "It's a parasitic trade. It's soul-destroying. I'd rather die."

"Don't be silly!" said Mrs. Dillon, sharply, and rang the bell.

"In half an hour," said Mr. Dillon, and went out as Ellie came in.

Ellie had been in good domestic service for the past seven years and was accustomed to take in her stride those little upsets that occur so frequently in all households. Well-trained, she paid no attention to Girlic's mild fit of hysterics but cleared the table deftly, while weighing the merits of roast or boiled mutton with her mistress. When Girlic, pushing back her chair so roughly that it was knocked to the floor, fled from the room clasp ing George's letter to her bosom, Ellie did not even look after her but picked up the chair and said boiled with caper sauce would make a nice change. Mrs. Dillon, following Girlic, was extremely pleased with Ellie. Really, she almost made up for everything.

Girlic was having a second fit of hysterics in her bedroom. Mrs. Dillon, aware that this was one of the happily rare occasions when William meant what he said (from long experience she could judge by the timbre of his voice and

the size of his veins), told Girlie that she might as well get ready and go to the Stores because, sooner or later, she'd have to. Girlie, mute, cringed into a corner before this cruelty.

"Hurry up!" said Mrs. Dillon. "It'll keep him quiet for a while, maybe, and it'll save me going out of my mind." Encouragingly, she added: "He'll probably get over the idea soon, but he's set on it now."

"Nothing," said Girlie from her corner, "will make me give up George."

"To tell you the truth," said her mother, frankly, "I can't help wondering why."

Girlie laughed hollowly.

"How would you have felt if someone had wanted you to give up Daddy?" She shuddered. "I suppose you liked him once."

"I like him now," said Mrs. Dillon. It was nine years since she had slapped her child but her hand tingled with the old familiar itch. "Are you going, or are you waiting for him to come back for you?"

Girlie stood at bay.

"He can't drag me screaming through the streets."

"No," said Mrs. Dillon, "but he won't drag you screaming to Paris either, for that week he promised us."

Slowly, Girlie emerged to the centre of the room. It took her a long while to get there. At last, just in time to prevent her mother breaking down completely and throwing the hairbrush, which was the nearest missile to hand, she said, gallantly: "After all, what are two years out of a lifetime? It will pass. What'll I wear, Mother?"

"Your blue," said Mrs. Dillon, thankfully.

Sweet and simple in her blue, Girlie hurried to George. At Ocean View, she besought Mrs. Finnegan for him, but, Mrs. Finnegan being enthralled with young love, and particularly thwarted young love, it was fully five minutes be-

fore she yielded her place in the doorway to her boarder and even then she stood discreetly at the end of the passage, beaming benevolently on the star-crossed pair.

"Oh, George!" Girlie laid a trembling little hand on his arm. "I can't meet you on the strand this morning. I have to go to the Stores. I have to go every day. He's making me. I have to *work* there."

Manly and comforting, George said: "He won't make you work hard. He's not an *utter* brute."

Feeling exquisitely fragile and precious, Girlie held on to her protector.

"George! It's bolstering up the System."

"That can't be helped," said George, tolerantly, "and it's not your fault."

"But, George! Every day! I'll die!"

He squeezed her hand.

"Be brave! I'll meet you there."

"I must fly. He's raging." Girlie tore herself away, calling back urgently: "Where?"

The incredible answer rang down the street.

"In the Stores."

Dillon's Drapery Stores was the most imposing establishment in Ballykeen. It had a modernised black frontage and two large plate-glass windows, one devoted to men's wear, the other to women's. Girlie stood and sneered at sports coats and trousers on one side, and summer frocks on the other, before sauntering insolently in. Past Haberdashery and Gents' Suitings on the right hand (carefully ignoring her father in Suitings) and Ladies' Haberdashery and the Manchester Department on the left, she strolled through the ground floor and languidly mounted the six steps to Mantles on the mezzanine. Here she stood, looking as disagreeable as possible, until Miss Harrington hurried forward to greet her employer's daughter.

"Good morning, Miss Dillon."

"Good morning." Girlie frowned. "Perhaps I'm not expected?"

"Oh, yes, Miss Dillon. Mr. Dillon told us you might be coming. We were so excited to hear it." Used to the foibles of customers, Miss Harrington was undaunted by Girlie. "It will be wonderful to have you with us."

Girlie smiled as disagreeably as possible.

"What am I supposed to do?"

"I thought you might prefer to look around, more or less, today," said Miss Harrington. "To get the hang of things, if you see what I mean, more or less."

"I think I do," said Girlie, "more or less."

Miss Harrington left her abruptly and took it out immediately on one of the three girls in her charge for having an untidy box of underwear. Pleased with herself, Girlie inspected a rail of coats and then stalked Miss Harrington to Millinery.

"Who chooses the stuff here?"

"I'm the buyer," said Miss Harrington, expressionlessly.

"I dare say people who want decent clothes would shop in Dublin, anyway."

Miss Harrington turned a dusky red. The girl who had been unjustly reprimanded tittered; the other two looked carefully blank. Girlie pulled forward a chair to where she could watch the ground floor, sat down and lit a cigarette.

She sat for what seemed to her hours. The ground floor became busy, and then Mantles, but Girlie did not stir. Usually she smoked very little but now she smoked incessantly because it was about the most unbusinesslike-looking thing she could do. Many of the customers in Mantles were acquaintances of hers and with these she chatted amiably enough but not concealing the boredom of her circumstances. At eleven o'clock she was given a cup of tea and two biscuits. She gave them back because the tea was too weak. At half-past eleven, George came.

Dauntless, head high, he stood for a moment inside the doorway, glanced around with a lordly air and then, cool and wonderful, made for Gents' Haberdashery. Girlie jumped up. Her heart sang like a bird; like a bird she could have flown the six steps of the stairs down to George. She pivoted and met Miss Harrington's inimical gaze.

"I think I'll go to Gloves and Stockings for a while."

"Certainly," said Miss Harrington, coldly.

"And—oh, Miss Harrington," said Girlie, her love-lit eyes fixed on Gents' Haberdashery, "I'm sorry. I really am."

Miss Harrington looked towards Gents' Haberdashery too and, very nobly, she smiled.

"That's all right, Miss Dillon. We all feel out of sorts sometimes."

From Gloves and Stockings, Girlie, breathless, lips parted, stared rapt at the opposite counter. Leaning nonchalantly against it, George was prodding in a dissatisfied manner at ties.

"Have you nothing in maroon?"

His voice rolled like music across the aisle and up and down Girlie's spine.

"Maroon, sir?" The assistant opened a third box and draped a spotted tie invitingly over his knuckles. "This is rather neat."

The manly voice said, with wearied disparagement: "I prefer stripes."

"Spots are very new, sir."

"Stripes," said George, inflexibly, while Girlie thrilled with pride. Then she gasped and caught her underlip in her teeth. With ponderous, menacing tread, Mr. Dillon was approaching Gents' Haberdashery. Every nerve in Girlie's body sent a warning towards Haberdashery. But George, reckless, unheeding, continued to push ties hither and thither over the polished board. And then, while Girlie stared wide-eyed, trembling, feeling like Lord Ullin's daughter, her lover and

her father met for the first time face to face with only the tie-heaped counter between.

"Perhaps," said Mr. Dillon, suavely (Girlic, knowing that suavity, shook), "I can be of some help?"

"This gentleman is looking for striped maroon, sir."

"I will attend to him, Mr. Tilson."

The assistant placed a fourth box in front of his employer and retreated. Breathing heavily, Mr. Dillon spread neck-gear lavishly before George.

"Maroon. Striped."

"H'm! I think a narrower stripe."

"Certainly. This is a narrower stripe."

"Wrong shade," said George sadly.

Mr. Dillon swallowed. To Girlic the counter separating her menfolk seemed all too frail a barrier.

"We carry an extremely large stock. I regret we are unable to meet your requirements."

"Well," said George, kindly, "I suppose that's bound to happen sometimes."

Mr. Dillon swallowed again.

"Very seldom, I'm glad to say."

"What I want," said George, "is a shade between *this* and *this*. And a stripe this width." He approximated thumb and forefinger, studied them and moved them an infinitesimal fraction farther apart. "No, this width."

Mr. Dillon gave a stately bow.

"If the tie you describe is manufactured, we shall get it."

"You mean a special order? Now that," said George, warmly, "is what I call good business. I see you stand for Truth in Advertising. Dillon's Stores Can Clothe You Fashionably From Head To Foot, eh? Except shoes, of course—but that's poetic licence." He stood up straight and nodded. "This has decided me. I wish to open an account."

"That," said Mr. Dillon, still stately but maroon himself now and even becoming faintly striped, "is most gratifying."

"My name——"

"I know it. I have heard it—often." To Girlie's horror, he stared straight at Gloves and Stockings. "Very often."

"Do you need a banker's reference?"

Deliberately Mr. Dillon's gaze encompassed George's yellowed nylon shirt and worn coat-sleeves and lingered long on the stringy, faded length of poplin around his neck.

"Not all our customers have bank accounts."

"That's good," said George, cheerfully, "because I'm one of those."

Mr. Dillon drew himself to his full height.

"Our policy is to trust our customers—until the end of the month. Within the precincts of these Stores, sir, a man is regarded simply and solely as a customer, even if outside them he happens to be the greatest blackguard unhung. And now, Mr. Pepper, can I do anything else for you?"

"A lady's handkerchief," said George, "but I think that's at the other side."

Weak, Girlie leaned on the counter as George came magnificently towards her. Inarticulate with admiration, she could say only: "Oh, George!"

"You seem surprised to see me. I said I'd come, didn't I?"

"Yes, but—oh, *George!*"

"I'll come every day. How are you finding things? I've never been in this place before. A fine shop."

"I hate it. You know it's grinding down the faces."

"Grinds 'em down well, by the look of it. A very fine shop," said George, thoughtfully. He jerked his head at Mantles. "What's it like upstairs?"

"The same as here." Girlie's voice broke. "I hate it all."

"Cheer up! *I'm* here now. Sell me a handkerchief."

"Oh, why, George?"

"Use your head. If I'm coming every day, I'll have to have some excuses. I don't suppose there's anything cheaper than a handkerchief, is there?"

"I don't know." Girlie paused. "Needles," she suggested, brilliantly, "or pins?"

He gave her a look of approval that made her want to leap the counter to him.

"Clever girl! You'll make a wonderfully thrifty wife. Pins it is."

It took George a long time to choose a threepenny paper of pins, but Girlie proved herself a model salesgirl, indefatigably showing plain and safety pins of all sizes. Whenever Mr. Dillon emerged to prowls around aimlessly like a demented shop-walker, Girlie was showing pins, and, before the purchase was finally made, he had retired to lurk in Suitings.

Slowly, very slowly, Girlie made a parcel, securing it with both twine and tape. Handing it to George, she said: "Oh, darling!"

Handing her threepence, George said: "Darling!"

"Tomorrow, darling?"

"Every day, darling."

"Oh, darling!"

"Darling!"

Back in Mantles, Girlie smiled dreamily at everyone. At lunch, she smiled through her parents. She got no answering smiles. Mrs. Dillon made a few attempts to converse with her husband; he grunted laconically twice but, for the rest, speechlessly ate. Supper was equally unsociable. Immediately after it, the wife and mother, craving for the company of those who were sensibly neither, set forth for the Workhouse with a reluctant Girlie in tow.

The evening was so balmy that the Goddeys spent it sitting on the stone bollard at the end of the pier where the little pleasure craft were moored. He always wore his blue and white striped jersey to sit here and, seeing him put it on, his wife looked forward hopefully to a peaceful interlude for Mickey and herself. If all went well, the Goddeys would earn

beer money by being picturesque and handsome with the broad ocean as his background and by easy throwing down or hauling up of nautical ropes. Possibly some summer visitor—especially if English, for his compatriots were, on the whole, less impressed by the Goddey—would stand him pints until well into the night for the pleasure of his native wit. After a trip to the pier the Goddey generally returned home tolerably good-humoured, with a sailor's roll and inclined to sing sea-shanties.

Mrs. Coyle set the table for Mickey and recklessly opened a tin of sardines that she had stored in hiding. When he came in he was whistling.

"Pa out?"

"Gone to the pier," said Mrs. Coyle, happily, "and look what I have for you, Mickey!"

Mickey gave one final long, loud whistle of appreciation. Then he grinned.

"And look what I have for you!"

Mrs. Coyle stared at the plastic envelope.

"Mickey! It's stockings!"

"Sure," said Mickey, swaggering. "Are they right? Take 'em out and see."

"They're wonderful," said Mrs. Coyle, putting them hastily on the table without making any attempt to discover if they were and turning to poke the fire wildly under the kettle.

"Ah, go on, Mammy!" Mickey said, impatiently. "Take a look at 'em."

Mrs. Coyle put down the poker, sniffed, and opened the plastic envelope. Delicate, shadowy, the stockings spiralled out and clung to the roughened skin of her hands. Awed, she said: "They're so fine it's like as if there was nothing there."

"Too fine?" asked Mickey, anxiously.

"They're the most beautiful stockings I ever seen in all my life."

Mickey sat down nonchalantly.

"Said I'd get 'em for you, didn't I? The kettle's boiling."

"The Queen of England couldn't have better." Mrs Coyle was carefully sliding the stockings back into their covering. "You shouldn't have wasted your money on me." With the two ends of the stockings caught gingerly between finger and thumb, she paused. "How did you manage it? Your Pa left you nothing."

"Tips." Mickey pulled the tin of sardines towards him. "Hurry up with the tea, will you, Mammy."

"Tips?" said Mrs. Coyle, slowly. She looked at her son and at the stockings. The hand that held them began to shake. "Mickey, fifteen and six is marked on 'em. I didn't know stockings could be that dear. Mickey, you never got fifteen and six in tips."

Mickey selected a sardine.

"Who says I didn't?"

"You couldn't. Not that much."

"Makin' a liar outa me, eh?"

"I'm making nothing out of you, only, Mickey, tell me! Tell me how you got them!"

"I fecked 'em," said Mickey, calmly. "His mother jerked her hand away. 'It's all right. I was careful. They'll never be missed.'"

"Oh, my God!" said Mrs. Coyle, hopelessly. She began to tramp heavily up and down the kitchen, not looking at her son, beating the clenched fist of one hand into the palm of the other. "What'll I do? Oh, God and His Blessed Mother have pity on us all this day!"

Mickey wriggled. He said, angrily: "If I'd known you'd make such a fuss, I'd have left you without 'em. I'm telling you they won't be missed."

Unheeding, blind, his mother went by. Suddenly she came striding towards him and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Get up! We're going to the Workhouse Graces."

Mickey tried to shake himself free, but her fingers clawed

desperately into his flesh through his thin shirt. Childishly he said: "Stop it, Mammy! You're hurting me."

"Come on! We'll ask Peter and Paul what to do."

"What kind of a bloody fool do you think I am?" With a determined effort, he tore himself free and faced her from a safe distance with sullen amazement. "It's a nice thing when a chap's own mother wants to split on him!"

As he opened the door, her strange expression halted him on the threshold.

"If you go out of this house, Mickey Coyle, I'll go straight to the clift and throw meself over." She dabbed back the sweaty hair from her forehead with both hands. "It'll be no matter to me to find myself in Hell, after, for you've put me there already."

On either side of Girlie, who lolled with marked disinterest in a parlour arm-chair, sat Paul, attentive and concerned, and Mrs. Dillon, concluding an angry soliloquy.

"They can quarrel morning, noon and night over that Pepper man for all I care, but will that satisfy them? Oh no! *I* have to be 'dragged into it always.' The outraged mother darted a venomous glance at her supine child. "Will you speak to her, Sister Paul? She won't listen to *me*." Mrs. Dillon paused for a high-pitched, staccato laugh. "I'm only her mother."

There was a second bitter laugh followed by a brief, blessed silence. Then Girlie yawned. Before Mrs. Dillon, visibly gathering all her forces to address her daughter, could do so, Paul said, hurriedly: "It's a difficult problem."

Girlie gave her a look of grave and pious reproof.

"Whom God hath joined——"

"He hasn't joined you yet," snapped Mrs. Dillon, bouncing on her chair, "and He won't, if I can prevent it." She bounced around to Paul. "All I ask is peace and quiet in the home. That's not too much to hope for, is it?"

Paul, whose knowledge of homes, though second-hand, was wide, thought it was. She said, soothingly: "These things often settle themselves after a while."

"That's all very well," said Mrs. Dillon, coldly, "but after how long a while?"

Girlie smiled at the ceiling as sweetly as if George were floating there.

"Not longer than two years, anyway."

Mrs. Dillon turned her back completely on her daughter.

"She has everything a girl could want——"

"Except," said Girlie softly, "George."

"Everything," continued Mrs. Dillon, magnificently unconscious of interruption, "we can give her."

To the ceiling, Girlie remarked dreamily that she hadn't a car, either. Remembering some unmerited criticisms of her own driving, Mrs. Dillon admitted that William was inclined to be old-fashioned about women drivers. All men, she said, tolerantly, had their little foibles. Dismissing these for the trifles they were, she leaned forward impressively.

"Last birthday, Sister Paul, he gave her a fur jacket. A good fur jacket."

"Cost price," said Girlie.

"And now," said Mrs. Dillon, always aggressively unaware of a third person in the room, "the very first time he asks her to do something in return—merely to take an interest in the business—she won't do it."

Stung by this blatant injustice, Girlie said, indignantly: "I did so. I was stuck in the old place all day."

"Talking to that George."

"I was selling to him. Is there a rule in the Stores that you mustn't speak to customers? And why," demanded Girlie, challengingly, "call him *that* George?"

Paul saw it was time to take a firm grip. She beamed on furious mother and daughter.

"What a wonderful opportunity, Girlie dear, for you to

show yourself no feather-brain, but a level-headed business woman competent to make her own decisions!"

Thoughtfully, Girlie said: "H'm!" She frowned. "That's all very well, but you don't realise how deadly dull the Stores is." She turned on her mother. "*You* know. You've always been careful to keep out of it."

"Your mother," said Paul, sternly, "has her household duties. And it amazes me to hear you call the drapery trade dull." She sounded genuinely amazed. "Silks and satins—all the colours of the rainbow——"

Girlie laughed contemptuously.

"That's just what's wrong with the Stores. Plenty of colour. But not one well-cut simple black dress in the whole place."

Paul said, sharply: "Then make it your business to put a well-cut simple black dress there!"

"You don't understand." Girlie smiled pityingly. "No one in Ballykeen would look for it in the Stores."

Paul was silent for a moment. Then she murmured: "You never know." She threw back her head. "To thine own self be true! Prove yourself to yourself, child—to your father and mother—and"—she raised one hand—"to George!"

"George," said Girlie, complacently, "doesn't want a capable, level-headed business woman. He just wants me."

Paul gazed at her as wisely and as sadly as a tired old mare might watch a playful filly.

"Men want different things at different times. You'll find that out."

Like Girlie, Mickey, in the small dining-room, was flanked on either side. Despite the disadvantage of an upright chair, he not only managed to loll, but to appear even more disagreeable and insolent than she. Peter was barely able to keep her patience by not looking at him. But she soon found it equally trying to look at his mother. Pale and shabby and

defeated, Mrs. Coyle sat wringing her hands and reproaching and excusing her son in the same breath. At last Peter could contain herself no longer. She said, sharply: "I told you before that you should stand up for your rights. If you needed stockings——" She paused. It was plain that Mrs. Coyle did need stockings, as well as much else. "If you made it your business to get the price of a pair of stockings from that husband of yours," said Peter, angrily, "no one would have had to steal some for you."

Mrs. Coyle seemed to crumble and shrink in her chair.

"Tom is out of work."

She sounded so spiritless that Peter yearned to pull her up and shake her. Instead she said, charitably: "You don't look well. Remind me to give you some iron pills before you go. And now"—she turned to Mickey—"what have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothing," said Mickey.

Silently he and Peter measured each other's strength. Mrs. Coyle wailed imploringly.

"Tell Sister Peter you're sorry, Mickey!"

Mickey smiled scornfully. He indicated his mother's thin legs, wound together and apologetically pushed under her chair.

"That's all she has even for Mass on Sundays. She's ashamed of the neighbours."

"And so you thought you'd improve matters? Well," said Peter, disappointedly, "you *are* a stupid boy. You can see what you've done to your mother, as if what she had to bear already wasn't enough."

Mickey looked sullenly at his weeping mother. Then he looked at Peter. He scowled. Mrs. Coyle wailed on.

"You're sorry, aren't you, Mickey lovey?"

"He's not," said Peter. She clicked her tongue in weary irritation at the distracted woman. "For goodness' sake, be quiet and let the boy speak for himself. He's sorry for worry-

ing *you*, and that's something, because it means he won't do the same thing again. But I'm perfectly sure he's not sorry otherwise."

Mickey stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Why should I be?"

"I can give you one very good reason."

"I don't want any holy stuff."

Peter studied him calmly and deliberately. At last she said, with a grim smile: "My reason is that I'm surprised that you should want to model yourself on your father."

Mickey's mouth fell open. He stared at her. A flush spread gradually over his freckled cheeks. He shuffled his feet. He took his hands from his pockets. The flush reached his ears and burned redly there. Uncomprehending of all that was passing unspoken between her son and Peter, Mrs. Coyle said, wretchedly: "I suppose Mr. Dillon must be told. Maybe he'll give Mickey another chance."

Mickey lifted one shoulder in a resigned half-hearted shrug. There was no more defiance left in him.

"We won't risk it," said Peter, decidedly. Mickey and his mother looked at her in astonishment. "Confession," she explained carefully to the two slow-witted Coyles, "is fine for the soul, but you have to be careful whom you confess to. But the stockings will have to be put back, of course."

Mrs. Coyle's red-rimmed eyes widened in horror.

"I tore the envelope. And I'd never fix 'em back neat the way they was, anyway."

Mickey said, despondently: "It doesn't make any difference, Mammy. It was easy enough to feck 'em, but it wouldn't be so easy gettin' 'em back."

Peter pondered for a moment.

"You can give me the price of them when you get your wages and I'll get Girlie Dillon to slip it in the till."

"His father——" Mrs. Coyle choked. "He takes charge of Mickey's wages. He'll find out."

Bluntly, Peter asked: "Would he mind?"

"He'd mind about paying back," said Mrs. Coyle, simply. "They was dear."

"Fifteen and six," said Mickey.

"Oh, my gracious!" said Peter, shocked. "Couldn't you have had the sense to steal a cheaper pair?" She sighed. "Very well. I'll give the money myself to Girlie, and you can pay me back some time." She glared at Mickey. "You're a *very* stupid boy."

"Yes," said Mickey. "I'm sorry."

Barking loudly, the Workhouse watchdog escorted Mrs. Dillon and Girlie out through the archway, and almost immediately afterwards had to rise again from the one small patch of sunshine by the gate to ensure that Mrs. Coyle and Mickey did no damage on their way out, either.

From the window, the Workhouse Graces silently watched their visitors depart. Then Paul sighed.

"I can't remember if there's Vitamin C in sunshine."

"Only D, I think."

"Oh, dear me! I was hoping Tim might be making up out there for missing his oranges." Paul closed her eyes against the deficiently nourished dog. "How much longer can we hold out, Peter?"

"You keep on asking that in a loaves-and-fishes manner," Peter said crossly. "Fifteen and sixpence shorter now, anyway, thanks to Mickey Coyle."

Paul kept her eyes closed while she gripped her rosary beads. After all, no matter how pceevish Peter sounded, there *had* been loaves and fishes. She thought hard. There had been Saint Veronica with her basket of roses, too, though, of course, what Peter and she needed was the other way round. There had been Elijah and those kind ravens.

There was, always, Blessed Mother Assumpta.

Chapter Seven

The Workhouse Graces were, for the season of the year, unusually busy next morning in their unofficial clinic. Following a sick and penitent alcoholic (with resigned pessimism, Peter sent him off to Father Hanlon to take the pledge for the fifth time) came a hobble of rheumatisms, two cut fingers, a sore throat, a bruised knee and a remarkably fine crop of warts. Peter shook her head mournfully over the stock of medicaments when the last unofficial patient had left; it was running low, but it would last herself and Paul out. They had dispensed remedies and wound bandages with reckless generosity today. They had almost abandoned hope.

Falling thankfully into a chair (her feet weren't as good as they had been), Peter looked out at the courtyard. Paul was looking out, too. For a few minutes they brooded together over the dear, familiar scene. Then Paul turned her head from it.

"They *do* say, Peter, that God never shuts one door but He opens another."

Peter smiled wryly.

"He's opening another, sure enough, but we don't want to go in."

"That doesn't count," said Paul, indignantly. "He can't get away with that!" Peter's glance told her plainly that He could get away with anything. Paul stared out mournfully at the courtyard again. In a far corner of it, Richard was clearing the last few remaining weeds. "Borgia says Richard is being very rude to her about her meanness lately. He doesn't realise, of course, why she has to economise. Can we afford his pound on Saturday, Peter?"

"No."

"We could do without butter."

"If we do without anything more, we'll starve. Even as it is, I'm hungry."

"If we were Cistercians or Poor Clares, we'd be better able for it. We'd be used to fasting."

"We're not Cistercians or Poor Clares."

"If we were Franciscans," said Paul, wistfully, "we'd be allowed to ring a bell to let the townsfolk know we needed food."

"We're not——. What's that you said?" asked Peter sharply.

"I said if we were——"

"I know. I heard you the first time."

Paul gazed at her reproachfully. But Peter was looking into space. Paul caught her breath. She knew that look.

"Oh, Peter, are you thinking—even yet?"

"Keep quiet!"

Incredibly at this eleventh hour, it was plain the courageous woman was thinking. Carefully keeping quiet, Paul watched Richard strolling now across the courtyard with a hoe on his shoulder. But, after a short silence, all that Peter said was: "We'd better face it and tell Richard there'll be no money for him this week and no Workhouse the next."

She got laboriously to her feet. Flatly and miserably, Paul said: "Yes."

Peter gave Richard the news in the fewest possible words. Whenever he seemed about to utter any himself, she spoke quicker and faster. Paul, gazing at him wretchedly, said nothing. Only when Peter concluded, briskly: "Come to the parlour and say good-bye to us before you go back to the County Home," Paul, heart-broken at this finality, added: "But you'll come to see us at the convent sometimes, maybe, Richard?"

Richard lowered at them. Then he threw down his hoe.

"The bloody skin-flints! "

"Richard! "

"Grudging the few pence that would keep the bite in your mouths! "

"I think," said Peter coldly, "You're forgetting yourself."

She and Richard confronted each other terribly.

"The Order of Grace has those other heavy expenses," said Paul, rushing in, "and we'll all be perfectly well off in the convent." She smiled with a dreadful brightness. "But we're sorry to part with you, Richard." Richard still looked terrible. "And we're very sorry that we can't manage your pound this week."

"And who the hell," demanded Richard, ferociously, "gives a damn about the bloody pound! "

"*Richard!*"

But neither Peter's rigid glare, nor Paul's trembling entreaty, could recall Richard to himself now.

"What's to happen to the little ass, I'd like to know? Thrun out on the road to die, I suppose, to save the price of a wisp of hay? An' the little dawg? Put down be the vet, most like." Richard gave a fearful laugh. "Or it could be the river and a brick around his neck to save the vet's fee." In a mincing falsetto, he said: "We mustn't waste our money, that we need to build pretty school-rooms for snotty-nosed brats to waste their time in, and to doll up chapels for pray-in', so that we can flap about with haloes later on."

"I am *very* surprised at you, Richard. Come, Paul," said Peter, and stiffly walked herself and Paul off.

"And where," roared Richard after them, "will I go for a rest and a change of air from now on?" Smitten through, Paul turned her sad face back to him. "And don't hand me out any of your rubbish talk!" he roared at her. "A nice welcome I'd get from that stuck-up Reverend Mother of yours, wouldn't I, if I called to her convent and asked to see my nuns?"

"Sometimes," said Paul, faintly, as they shut out the awful sight of Richard still calling to them from over his hoe, "things are even worse than you expect them to be." Peter said nothing. "Oh, Peter, please don't blame Richard for being upset! Please don't feel too annoyed with him!"

Peter gave her an odd look.

"No. I won't feel too annoyed with Richard."

Richard was seen no more around the Workhouse that day. But he was seen a lot around town. And at ten o'clock that night he was in Hennessy's bar when George Pepper entered in the course of equipping himself for the future dissection of Ballykeen. Richard, frowning over his glass in the middle of a frowning group, gave one intelligent, hopeful yelp at George and clove towards him.

It was two hours and two sober bottles of stout apiece later, that George comfortably prepared to revise his note-book in bed and Richard's candle was lit in the east wing of the Workhouse.

The following Friday, Father Hanlon, carrying an *Argus* and smiling like a tom-cat, walked up the convent avenue. As he neared the hall door, Reverend Mother came around the corner of the house from the garden. They met by the steps.

"Good-afternoon, Reverend Mother." She looked very cool and sure of herself; 'saintly,' thought Father Hanlon, 'in an irritating way.' His smile broadened. "A beautiful afternoon." He tapped the newspaper under his arm. "I brought you the *Argus*."

She seemed faintly surprised at this unusual thoughtfulness.

"Thank you, Father. I don't think ours has come yet. Won't you come in?"

"I'll be getting home again. I only walked out for a bit of exercise. And to hear," said Father Hanlon, very casually,

as he handed her the *Argus*, "if you knew of any developments regarding our friends Peter and Paul."

Reverend Mother's frown was troubled.

"I'm afraid what funds they had must be running very low by now."

"I told you," said Father Hanlon, "that they'd hold out to the last ditch."

"I didn't wish to cause them any hardship."

"There was bound to be a touch of hardship in that plan of yours. Mind you!" said Father Hanlon, admiringly, "it was a fine clever scheme of getting what you wanted with no discredit to anyone. I suppose you're expecting them back any day now, meek as mice?"

Reverend Mother smiled.

"Perhaps not meek as mice, but back."

In a peculiar, purring tone, Father Hanlon said: "Take a look at your *Argus*."

Reverend Mother shot him a quick glance. He was humming a dreamy tune to the gable end of the convent. Making no attempt to open the newspaper, she said, levelly: "If Mr. Pepper has written another article, I presume this time about the imminent closure of the Workhouse, that can do no harm. It is as well for the facts to be known—though ordinarily I dislike equally newspaper publicity and Mr. Pepper's style." She clasped her hands on the *Argus* and said, with distinct challenge: "I am convinced that, whatever information the young man was given by Sisters Peter and Paul, at least they uttered no complaint. I would be ashamed of myself not to trust them implicitly to that extent."

Father Hanlon removed his attention from the gable wall with unconcealed surprise.

"You really think they're the sort to suffer in silence? Somehow, they'd never strike me that way." He shook his head at her innocence. "Still, you were nearly right. They didn't breathe a word to a soul except to tell that man of

theirs that they couldn't keep him any longer." Reverend Mother's lips set thinly. Richard Burke was one of the sorer points at issue between herself and her two absent sisters in religion. "But of course the result was the same as if they'd broadcast it. He told everybody."

Unflinchingly, Reverend Mother repeated: "It can make no difference. The facts had to be known, sooner or later."

Like a child waiting for a gift to be unwrapped, Father Hanlon said, impatiently: "*Do* look at your *Argus*!"

But Reverend Mother, rigid as a statue, was looking down the avenue instead. Father Hanlon looked down the avenue, too. Up it was coming, at a smart pace, the Workhouse donkey and trap and Richard. All were utterly resplendent. Billy's hooves, the brasses of his harness, the newly-varnished trap and Richard's white shirt-front dashed hypnotically gleaming towards the convent. Near the steps, the equipage came to a magnificent, chariot-type halt and Richard touched his cap respectfully to the Reverend Mother and the parish priest while Billy stood proud and motionless, a model to all donkeys.

"And what," asked Father Hanlon, looking with amazement into the trap and then at Reverend Mother, "have we here?"

Reverend Mother did not answer. It was obvious what they had. They had vegetables and fruit and chickens and fish and a big basket of eggs.

"Sister Borgia," explained Richard, addressing with stately deference the two important personages, "told me to bring these to the convent kitchen. They'd only go bad on her." His face was expressionless. "We have too much at the Workhouse. That little dawg is being sick all over the place on Vitamin C." He allowed himself a slight frown of severity. "People should space out their presents better. Sister Borgia told them so."

Carefully keeping his eyes from Reverend Mother, Father Hanlon pointed shakily.

"That's a fine chicken."

"A cut knee." Richard patted its fellow. "This is a rheumatism." He inclined his head with dignified courtesy to Reverend Mother. "Will I bring them around to the back?"

Impassively, Reverend Mother said: "Do, please." Impassively Richard inclined his head again. Father Hanlon did not know which of the two he admired most. He admired himself, also, for his miraculous self-control. When donkey, trap and Richard had moved impeccably and gloriously from view there was only the barest quiver at the corner of his mouth when he turned to Reverend Mother.

"The second page."

The second page of the *Argus* was headed: 'WORKHOUSE FUND. ENTHUSIASTIC GATHERING IN TOWN HALL FOR WORTHY OBJECT.' Over Reverend Mother's shoulder, Father Hanlon refreshed his jubilant memory. A meeting of the townspeople, convened at short notice, had been overflowingly attended. After a great many flowery speeches ('. . . wishes of our own Blessed Mother Assumpta . . . avert this painful and difficult decision from the Order of Grace . . . up to us to show our devotion to Blessed Mother Assumpta and our appreciation of the Order of Grace by ensuring that these devoted Sisters of the Order may be enabled to remain at the Workhouse while Sarah Slaney lives . . .' and from the Mayor, with sturdy plagiarism . . . 'prisoners of their own charity . . .') the people had got right down to business. A committee, with the Mayor as honorary chairman and Mr. George Pepper as honorary secretary, was formed and subscriptions invited. The response had been immediately overwhelming.

"Mr. Henry Fitzgerald—ten guineas. The tightest man in town," said Father Hanlon, with satisfaction, "but he knows

what's good for business." There was no comment from Reverend Mother. "Mr. William Dillon—h'm, that must be Mrs., surely, but I suppose she's broken it to him by now." He continued to pick out a name here and there from the long and impressive list, which ended with details of some who had offered services in kind. "Mr. Daniel Moloney—repair of kitchen utensils. (That's Danny Moloney the fighting tinker.) Mr. Patrick Looby—shoe repairs. Mr. Owen Kelly—oats and straw. I hear," remarked Father Hanlon, chattily, "that Mr. Richard Burke offered himself for any part-time job that would help pay for his keep above at the Workhouse, but he got no takers."

The silence beside him was unbroken. Unnerved at last, Father Hanlon ceased his happy perusal of the *Argus*. Reverend Mother closed the newspaper and folded it neatly. With fearful calm, she said: "This time Sisters Peter and Paul have gone too far."

"You can't blame Peter and Paul. They didn't initiate this."

Reverend Mother said, inexorably: "They're responsible for it."

"In the sense of existing, maybe they are, but you can't blame them for that, either." Reverend Mother regarded him with, for once, indifferently concealed dislike. Father Hanlon coughed. "I know how you feel. Those chickens and so on were a shock to me too. Almost a vulgar display, wasn't it? You could call it," he said, with æsthetic disapproval, "gilding the lily. But we must realise, Reverend Mother, that here are people willing to give with no hint of eternal reward or punishment to encourage 'em. It's a fine, new spirit. I'd like to see more of it."

Reverend Mother's fingers tightened on the newspaper. She showed no other sign of discomposure.

"No doubt all these persons mean well, but their generosity is wholly misplaced. They must be told so. The Mother

House will be extremely annoyed. The Order of Grace needs no charity."

"It's understandable that Ballykeen got a general impression that it *did*, so the Mother House will have to put up with it now. Ah, Reverend Mother," said Father Hanlon, sympathetically, "you've got yourself into a mess, I'm afraid. The people want their Workhouse Graces and they're willing to pay to keep their Workhouse Graces. There's no way out of it now without showing disrespect to Blessed Mother Assumpta and making the whole town angry." He shook his head in a superior masculine fashion. "Peter and Paul have bested you and you'll have to accept it or risk causing a schism in Ballykeen."

Reverend Mother gave him a peculiar look.

"Sometimes I think I could almost risk a schism."

"Well, you can't," said Father Hanlon, decisively, "because it's I'd have the trouble of settling it. These things are sent to try us, and we must grin and bear 'em." He was doing both admirably, but Reverend Mother appeared dangerously far from doing either. Her expression made him realise it was high time for him to carry on with his bit of exercise. He pulled himself together and became grave and very much her parish priest. "And I must tell you that His Lordship agrees with me, Reverend Mother."

A saintly statue, she waited patiently for him to be gone.

Chapter Eight

Many Gaelic coffees, hours of talk and promised manuscripts later, Gerald K. Simpson came to Ballykeen. As he drove towards it he saw below him the strand, golden and splendid as his mother had described, and the headlands reaching beyond where the white convent and the granite Workhouse faced each other across the water. Then he was down into the town, with the sea blazing through gaps in the streets and all around him a perky brightness that was in agreeable contrast to the many sullen little villages that had lowered on his way. He went first to the Spa Hotel, where the exotic palm trees of his mother's awed recollection were still rustling dryly in front of the pretentious façade, registered, garaged his car and set forth on foot on his pilgrimage.

He walked through a place familiar and unfamiliar as a waking dream. Here, in the middle of Main Street, were the Stores, with a contemporary frontage, but belonging yet to a Dillon; here, surely, was the small shop at the corner where his mother's father had bought plug tobacco; here was the church and the gravestones bearing names often spoken by his mother's soft voice. Mr. Simpson turned down a side-street and came to the promenade by the beach. This had wide expanses of new concrete that his mother could never have seen, but, beside the Ocean Dance Hall, were the charoplanes, hobby-horses, giant wheel and fortune-tellers that had made her so boastful of the great sport there'd be each summer in Ballykeen once Hurley's Amusements was in it. HURLEY said peeling pink letters to him now from caravan sides, and, answering, he gave four pennies to a machine that shot out in return a white card with a flattering reading

of his character, and rolled six more incompetently on to coloured squares that gave him no return at all. Then he left the great sport by the sea and went towards Workhouse Hill.

He went slowly. When he came to a stretch of road that turned a corner ahead before mounting the Hill, he went very slowly. Around that corner, above a high fuchsia hedge, he thought he saw smoke rising. ("The bees would be like mad things about the fuchsia," she said. "You'd pick the flowers and suck them and you'd get the honey that way as good as any bee.") A bent old man was coming along. Mr. Simpson stood watching the smoke (it *was* smoke) and waited.

"A fine day, thanks be to God," the old man said, courteously.

Hesitantly, Mr. Simpson asked: "Could you tell me if there's a cottage at the foot of Workhouse Hill?"

"There's the Goddey Coyle's."

"Is it an old house?"

"'Tis there whilst I remember." The old man coughed delicately. "Would you be a Yank, now?"

"Yes," said Mr. Simpson.

"I thought you had the cut of it." There was another delicate cough. "You wouldn't be related to the Coyles, be any chance, that you're enquiring for their place?"

"Not the Coyles. Can you remember a family named McGrath living in the cottage?"

Like an incantation, the old man said: "McGrath? McGrath? McGrath?" He gave a sudden whoop of triumph. "Ah, now I have it! Forty or fifty year ago, mebbe?" Mr. Simpson nodded. With sympathetic warning, the old man said: "All trace of them is gone from around here. Dead an' buried this fair while." He paused. Slowly he said: "Right enough, there was a daughter went to Americky." He cocked his head in anticipation. Mr. Simpson said: "My mother."

The old man fell back a step in artistic amazement and then warmly welcomed this scion of the old stock home.

The fuchsia was as thick and blossomy as Mr. Simpson had been told, and the bees were like mad things about it. But instead of gleaming whitewash and golden thatch were roughly plastered walls and a tarpaulin roof. Mr. Simpson was perfectly willing to indulge in sentiment today, but it was difficult to experience any emotion at this dwelling except gratitude at his own and his mother's good fortune in getting away from it. While he stared, deep in thought, a sandy-haired boy came to the door. Mr. Simpson continued to stare at the home of his ancestors. The boy came down the little path to the gate.

"Were you wanting something, sir?"

Mr. Simpson woke up with a start.

"My mother lived here." The boy looked surprised. "Forty years ago."

Glumly, the boy said: "It could a' been different then." He dug his heel into the ground and muttered reluctantly: "If you'd wish to come in and see the house, I'm sure my father and mother won't mind."

"Thank you. Some other time, perhaps," said Mr. Simpson, who had seen enough. He broke off a spray of fuchsia. "This is a wonderful hedge."

The boy's face brightened. In a rush of words, he said: "There's times on a sunny day when it's quiet-like, you'd stand here and with the bees in and out you'd think it was the hedge itself was singing." He stopped. He kicked a pebble from the path. "Ach!" he said curtly, "there's plenty fuchsia around these parts. 'Tis only a common sort of hedge."

"I sec," said Mr. Simpson, thoughtfully. He turned away and suddenly turned back again. "Would you have this from me as a—well, as a thank-offering?"

The boy gaped at the pound note and then took it in

quick, greedy fingers, giving one furtive glance at the house, crumpling the note in his fist and immediately sticking both hands in his pockets. He said, breathlessly: "Thank you, sir."

Mr. Simpson left the singing hedge and went on his way up Workhouse Hill. He was unreasonably disappointed, though he should have known, better than most, that poetry and avarice can go hand in hand.

Tim's frantic warning brought Peter and Paul to the window. The Workhouse watchdog full of Vitamin C and bark and bounce, was escorting a strange man to the hall door. The two nuns sat down, folded their hands in their laps and waited, still and serene, as nuns should wait. They listened to the swift patter of Borgia's scurry along the corridor, to the click of the opening hall door and to the indistinguishable murmur of the subsequent conversation. This went on so long that Peter began to frown impatiently and Paul to shift in her chair until the sound of footsteps and voices approaching the parlour allowed them to relax once more. When Borgia and Tim rolled in excitedly with the stranger, Peter and Paul were perfect pictures of calm nunhood.

"You'll never guess who we have, Sisters!" Borgia gave the visitor a proud push forward. "Who but the son of Eileen McGrath from the foot of the Hill!"

She stood back to enjoy the effect of her announcement. When at last Mr. Simpson was sitting down with a Workhouse Grace on either side of him, still uttering exclamations of astonishment and delight, Borgia said that things turned out better than you'd dare to hope for people sometimes, after all, and there was a batch of scones in the oven she had to keep her eye on, and went off with Tim.

"She's exactly what I expected," said Mr. Simpson, contentedly, "and so are both of you."

"Well, of course, we had no way of expecting you," said

Peter. She gave him a nod of approval. "But you're the kind of man I'd have said Eileen McGrath's son could grow into."

Paul said, dreamily: "Eileen was a lovely girl."

An odd little silence fell.

"She never forgot you. She meant, some day, to come back and thank you for all you did for her. When she knew she'd left it too late, I told her I'd come and say it for her."

Peter said, quickly: "There was no need to thank us. We nursed her once when she was ill, that's all."

"But it's nice," said Paul, gently, "that she remembered us. We were very fond of Eileen."

Peter coughed briskly. With a conventional and rather stiff politeness, she inquired if he were enjoying his visit to Ireland.

"It's interesting to see where I was born."

Another little silence fell.

"Yes, indeed. Ballykeen," said Paul, brightly, "is quite a pretty place."

Mr. Simpson smiled.

"I said it was interesting to see where I was born. I mean this Workhouse."

Peter said slowly: "So she told you that?"

"She told me everything. I know I was born here where illegitimate children were born and that you were the only ones she could turn to when her own parents would have nothing to do with her." He looked at them with another smile. "She told me you scolded her as if she were a bold child, of course."

"We were angry with her," said Peter, severely, "for being so wrong and foolish."

"She told me others were trying to make her put her baby away in a Home where it might be adopted later and she didn't want to let it——" Mr. Simpson laughed—"I mean me go, and you got the money for her to bring me to America

where she could start a new life. And she did. It was a good life, too, for both of us."

Peter said, smugly: "I guessed that girl would turn out well if she had the chance."

Blinking rapidly, Paul said: "She wasn't like other girls. She was a gentle, innocent girl." Fiercely she stared at Gerald Simpson as if daring him to criticise his mother. "They were very young and in love—she and Denny Keegan—and they meant to get married only of course Denny's father wouldn't have it because Eileen had no dowry."

"It seems to me," said Mr. Simpson, "that she was pretty lucky to escape my father. The husband she got was a definite improvement on him. He adopted me and I guess he made a better father than Denny, any day."

Paul looked unhappy.

"It's not right to speak like that of your father. Denny was a nice boy."

"He had to have a dowry with his wife," Peter explained, practically, "to give to his sister for *her* dowry, so that she could marry out of the Keegan farm when the new wife came into it."

"Complicated, isn't it?" remarked Mr. Simpson.

"That's the way it was. Is, too, sometimes."

"And poor Denny," said Paul, sadly, "got a dreadful wife in the end. She nagged him and she got fat." She glanced at Mr. Simpson and then away. "He died three years ago."

Mr. Simpson concealed his lack of proper grief at this news and his satisfaction at the fat, nagging Mrs. Keegan and told them of his mother's life in New York, and of his own, and showed them photographs of his wife and children. Paul was entranced with the youngest in his space-suit, but Peter seemed most impressed with a picture of the handsome family grouped before their Long Island home.

"You'd hardly have the like of that house, if you were born a Keegan. You've got on well."

"I went through Law School—my father, I mean my step-father, was an attorney—but I never practised. I'm in a publishing firm—it's only a small business yet but we're expanding."

Paul gazed at him, rapt.

"You're a *publisher*!"

With a proprietary, off-hand pride, Peter said: "She writes poems."

'Oh, my God!' thought Mr. Simpson, 'not here! But yes, he thought, observing with horror the long, clasped fingers and the ecstatic horse-face, 'here as well as everywhere.' Bravely he said (for if she wanted her little poems prettily printed and bound, she deserved it and she should have it): "We don't generally include poetry on our list. But I'd be very glad to see some of your work and we could always print a limited edition."

Paul flushed painfully.

"My poems aren't worth your attention. But we have a young friend—a writer—who would be most anxious to meet you."

Peter gave her a swift glance of approval and turned to Mr. Simpson.

"I'm no judge myself, but they say Mr. Pepper has a beautiful style."

Mr. Simpson said, faintly: "Indeed?"

"We could show you some of his newspaper articles." Paul leaned forward confidentially. "But his real bent is creative work. He's writing a book."

It was a sentence Mr. Simpson had heard often, very often. He said again, faintly: "Indeed?" Before he had time to say any more, Borgia came in, very prim and respectful now, with hands folded meekly across her checked apron.

"Mickey Coyle is outside wanting to see you, Sister Peter."

When Peter had followed Borgia out, Paul, clasping her hands, stared long and earnestly at Mr. Simpson.

"May I tell you *all* about George Pepper and Girlie Dillon, Mr. Simpson?"

Mr. Simpson listened for ten minutes to the romantic tale. He agreed that no one had the right to part young lovers. (He refrained from mentioning that no one had attempted to part him and his first young love, who had parted themselves, by mutual consent, after three miserable years of matrimony). He agreed that money counted less than people thought (but here he qualified, honestly, not much less). He agreed, finally, to read George Pepper's book, which, George being only twenty-three, was naturally still unfinished and, with a last desperate effort to safeguard himself, said that the greatest boon to any aspiring author was an exact appraisal of his work, because if a young man hadn't the stuff of writing in him it was best to tell him so and put him out of his agony quickly.

Paul was unperturbed by this warning. She said Girlie said George's novel was wonderful. Here she hesitated.

"I believe some rather outspoken books are written nowadays. But that wouldn't matter so much in *America*, would it, Mr. Simpson?"

While Mr. Simpson was reassuring her that it wouldn't, Peter, looking very pleased, returned with Borgia and a loaded tea-tray.

"Mickey Coyle came to pay me fifteen and sixpence he owed me. He said he was just after getting a pound from an American gentleman."

Mr. Simpson said: "He liked the hedge." Gladly, he repeated: "He *liked* the hedge."

Peter smoothed her skirts over her knees and smiled complacently at her own thoughts. Borgia, placing the tray beside Mr. Simpson, smiled complacently at her scones.

"They turned out well. I threw a few potato cakes on the pan, too. They don't have the like of those in America, I believe?" Mr. Simpson, whose wife was careful of his waist-

line, said they didn't. "And that cake," said Borgia, commandingly, as she moved it, black with fruit, to the centre of the tray, "is light as a feather."

By the time Mr. Simpson's two implacable hostesses had forced him to consume seven days' ration of carbohydrates at one fell swoop, he was, between starch and contentment, reluctant to move. Sitting there, over-fed and mindless, beaming back at the two beaming nuns, he felt extraordinarily peaceful. He was sure his blood pressure was falling rapidly and his arteries becoming beautifully elastic. With another week of this rest-cure, he could take Mr. Pepper's, or anybody else's, masterpiece, in his stride. He could take all New York in his stride.

Before he left, they brought him to Sarah. Decoratively arranged by Borgia, she spoiled the whole effect immediately by rolling in her pillows with a fierce cackle of laughter at sight of Mr. Simpson.

"*That'll show the Keegans!*" Rolling, she screeched on in her private merriment until Peter pulled her up and Paul bent to adjust the lace square on her lolling head. "Gaa!" Sarah jerked away from Paul's hand, leaving the lace askew over one eye and smiled a meaning smile at Mr. Simpson. "More power to Eileen McGrath, the unfortunate little creature! A millionaire, an't ye?"

"Well, not quite," said Mr. Simpson.

Sarah looked disappointed.

"Near enough, though, an't ye?" Pacifyingly, Mr. Simpson nodded. "So Eileen McGrath's son done well. An' Eileen, God help her, done well?" She paused for another nod from Mr. Simpson. "Ah, them Keegans were a stinkin' proud lot ever, but 'tisin't in *their* mean, dirty family, for all the high notions they had o' theirselves, that you'd find a Yankee millionaire this day! God bless ye, Eileen McGrath's boy!"

"She means well," said Peter.

"Why, I can see she does," said Mr. Simpson and gave a third very friendly nod at Sarah.

Crossing the courtyard with the Workhouse Graces, Mr. Simpson, despite the heavy load in his stomach, continued to feel soothed and happy. He had never before met people like Peter and Paul; in that moment, he could almost believe he had never met a dog like Tim. He felt Irish. He felt he had come home. Seeking for words to express his emotions, he noticed a large empty niche set in the wall near the gate, intended, surely, in this country, for some religious object, and was inspired to offer them, as a tangible token of his affection, whatever statue they chose to fill it.

Paul looked strangely disturbed. Peter said, quickly, that that niche was made for holding the churns of skim milk coming back from the creamery for the paupers. Mr. Simpson laughed, but he was disappointed. He still wanted to do something for them.

They said they would remember that. They promised if they ever wanted anything from him, they would be sure to let him know.

Chapter Nine

The expected blow fell one morning at breakfast on Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell. Bessie had rented the Glebe until the end of July and was leaving the Guest House next day.

The Glebe, which stood solitary by the cliffs half a mile outside the town, was altogether unsuitable for one old lady, especially an old lady with a fragile heart. It was Church of Ireland property, but long since the Protestant population of Ballykeen had dwindled beyond the need of a resident pastor and the big handsome old house was occupied now only by summer visitors with families too large to be fitted elsewhere. Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell told Bessie, decisively, that if she couldn't find some nice little bungalow, she'd be better off to stay where she was.

Bessie said, gaily: "But I don't want a nice little bungalow. I want the Glebe. It was once the most important house around here—I believe."

She sounded childishly excited, but for her own good, they continued to disapprove. Bessie went often to the Workhouse now, where she seemed to have formed a firm friendship with the Graces, and Mrs. O'Donnell said, hopefully, that Peter and Paul might persuade her to be sensible. Amazingly, it appeared that the Workhouse Graces had already so thoroughly entered into Bessie's plans as to have arranged that Mrs. Coyle should come to her daily and Mickey be her gardener and sleep in the Glebe at night.

"So you see," said Bessie, "I'll be well cared for and protected. I know I've been a bad girl to settle all this without consulting you both, but you're so persuasive you might have

talked me out of it. And I want to give a big house-warming party in my big house on Thursday, so you'll just have to forgive me and help me with the invitations."

In the afternoon, the three ladies went to inspect the Glebe. They found Mrs. Coyle polishing the floors and Mickey cutting the grass. Mrs. Murphy said, generously, that it was certainly a fine old house. Bessie said she expected them to see plenty of it, because they needn't think they'd shake her off so easily. Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell, though still saddened by the knowledge of her imminent departure from the Guest House, felt a little happier.

On their way back, Bessie stopped about a hundred yards beyond the Glebe.

"There was a house here once. So I've been told."

There was no house in the field by the coast road now. But inside the entrance, which was barred by a rusty bed-spring slung with barbed wire between two new concrete posts, nettles grew rankly about low outlines of crumbling clay. Cattle grazed in the sweeter grass beyond, and beyond again was the golden sea.

"There *was* a mud hut here. Look," said Mrs. Murphy, cleverly, "that's where the doorway was!"

"The hearth," said Bessie, pointing, "was there."

Mrs. O'Donnell peered. But all she could see was a clump of foxglove flaunting amongst the ugly weeds. The three women stood silent. The setting sun shimmered on the grass and outlined each black bullock in faint gold. On the wall of sods between the field and the cliff's edge, sea-pinks and cornflowers were bright. Gulls fell, like paper birds, mute to the sea.

"A peaceful spot," said Mrs. Murphy.

With an odd harshness, Bessie said: "It mightn't have been for those who lived here. This must have been a poor, miserable hovel, with the Glebe looking down on it across its grand lawn."

The morning of the Glebe cocktail party dawned grey and cold. By afternoon, when everyone had spent a wretched day of healthy, chilling exercise in the teeth of an east wind and vicious pellets of rain, or of unhealthy chilling sitting around indoors, all were eager for warmth and company and alcohol.

Mickey Coyle had worked hard at hoeing and raking the avenue and the gravelled space in front of the Glebe. He had also clipped every bush, but one, into a round ball. The exception was singularly conspicuous amidst the general neatness. Mrs. Murphy, leading her little group onwards, regarded it with regret.

"What a pity this is left unfinished. But on the whole," she added, justly, "the boy has done well."

"I don't think," said the crippled lady guest, coming along gallantly behind, "that it *is* unfinished. I think it's meant to *be* something."

"A hen?" said the myopic lady guest, peering.

"More likely a peacock," said Mrs. O'Donnell, "in spite of the tail. Perhaps the shears slipped."

Penitent at having misjudged Mickey, Mrs. Murphy explained to the dull lady guest. "They call it topiary. *Topiary*, dear," and went on to the hall door.

In the drawing-room an unseasonable fire of logs in the huge old-fashioned grate, and unnecessary, but pleasing, lights glowing from rose-coloured lamp-shades mitigated the stark June weather. Already the room was full ("Everyone that's anyone is here," Mrs. Murphy whispered to her charges) and waitresses were offering trays of drinks and expensive morsels.

"That dress," said Mrs. O'Donnell, in an aside to her friend, "doesn't look so bad on Bessie after all." (Strangely, considering her lilac—Hartnell?—and her charcoal—Sybil Connolly?—Bessie had insisted on buying a new dress for her party from little Miss Dillon. When warned, from drear experience, of what she might expect to find in the Stores;

when reminded of the utterly suitable lilac or charcoal, she had said, rather mournfully: "I'm afraid I've *got* to get a dress at the Stores.") "Quite good," said Mrs. Murphy. Knowledgeably she remarked: "Catering by the Spa Hotel, I see." With memories of her own past strenuous hospitality, she added, wistfully: "When one can afford to get professional caterers, one *enjoy* one's own party."

Bessie seemed to be enjoying hers. Lending an air of *haute couture* to the midnight-blue dress from the Stores, she was moving amongst her guests with a tall, slim fair-haired man. He alone was a stranger to the entire company and his appearance, accent and manner (all very English and well-bred) caused general curiosity.

Soon everyone knew that his name was Rodney Hailsham, that he had arrived the previous day on his first visit to Ireland, and that he was staying at the Glebe. He was, Bessie said, the son of a very dear old friend. The vast majority of the guests were favourably impressed by him (Savile Row, thought Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell, simultaneously) and particularly by a rumour that he was in the B.B.C. or films or some such esoteric occupation; a small, carping minority, all male, felt a twinge of almost forgotten Anglo-phobia stir again in their blood at his Saxon ease and self-assurance, combined with their distrust of the suspect world of art and entertainment.

Having been passed around generously as the food and drink, Bessie's Englishman chose a tactful moment to withdraw his hostess to a temporary isolation behind a table laden with bottles and glasses and made a tolerably convincing show of busying himself with these. In a reproachful whisper, he said: "My dearest Step-mamma——"

Bessie hissed: "*Bessie!*"

"A slip of the tongue, darling."

"And if you're in one of your naughty moods, you can snap right out of it!"

"I'm conducting myself admirably," said Rodney, indignantly. "I've allowed myself to be dragged in your wake like an ocean liner after a fussy tug." He glanced reflectively around the room. "What an unattractive crowd of men you've managed to assemble, on the whole!"

Sweetly, Bessie said: "You'll have to make do with the girls for once."

"They and I always get on splendidly, the dears. Now that's rather a taking little thing in green——"

"She belongs to Mr. Pepper."

"I've no intention of embroiling myself needlessly with the Press. I'm too valuable—one of the main attractions of your party. Soon, I shall allow myself to circulate again——"

"That," said Bessie, crushingly, "will be excessively good of you, ducks."

"I shall," continued Rodney, calmly, "chat to your dear old ladies. And then perhaps to that Chelsea pair near the coal-scuttle. Who're they?"

Bessie said worriedly: "I've forgotten, but I must have invited them."

"Oh, just some of the background rabble? Then I'll have a word with your American publisher. Where's he? Oh, yes, I see the tie. Then a pleasant line of banter here and there. I must meet that fascinating Dr. Jim again. He's such a perfect example of type-casting. And then," said Rodney, happily, "with my duty done, I shall anchor myself with a long, long drink beside that Beatrix Potter Lady Macbeth."

"Rodney, if you mean Melly Brown, that's *not* kind."

"But I truly like the look of her. I want to see what makes her tick. She has a most interesting, sullen expression—watch her glowering at that man with a lawyer's face!"

"He *is* a lawyer. Mr. Higgins." Rodney smirked. "Yes," said Bessie, with wasted sarcasm, "you're being frightfully clever."

"You're being rather clever yourself, aren't you, darling? You seem to have cast your net wide."

"Ah, but Peter and Paul wove the strands."

"I'm aching to meet those arch-intriguers." With a complete change of tone, he said, seriously: "But why Ballykeen at all, Step-mamma—very well, Bessie? I don't understand."

"I told you, Rodney. I wanted to gather all these people under my roof just once—the kind of people that I used to think were important long ago and that wouldn't have noticed me at all unless it was to throw me a penny for charity." Bessie gave a queer smile at the many guests enjoying her hospitality. "They seem so commonplace to me now. My party is giving me intense satisfaction."

"I understand *that* quite well. It's a perfectly ordinary and banal reaction. What I cannot understand is your wanting to *stay* in Ballykeen. I can't see you fitting in here."

"But this is where I do fit, Rodney. It was only when I came back to have one last look at Ballykeen that I knew it." She paused. "Like an elephant going off to the secret valley of the herd when the end is near."

Quickly, Rodney asked: "Is the old heart playing up?"

"Not any more than usual, ducks. But you know as well as I do that I'm liable to pop off any time." She patted her gold-tinged hair and blinked her faintly-mascaraed lashes at him. "And this is where I want to pop when that time comes. This is where it's right for me to be. I'm sure of that. Being old is like getting young again—you go back. This is where I belong—it's bred into my bones. The sea and the cliffs and the beaches—I always loved those, even when everything else in my life was horrible. Well, I've got 'em now. They make me feel safe—and Peter and Paul make me feel very safe and I've got them, too. I know what I'm doing, Rodney, so don't bother me any more but be off and work your way to your Lady Macbeth while I look after our

parish priest who promised to drop in and is being disapproving in the doorway, poor pet!"

"I'm not much for these fol-de-rol confections," said Father Hanlon, distrustfully regarding the proffered tray of cocktails.

"Wise man!" Bessie waved away one waitress and beckoned another. "Whiskey? Or I believe this is really good brandy. My palate's nothing to shout about but perhaps you'd tell me what *you* think of it?"

"Go easy now! Women," said Father Hanlon, indulgently, "are always heavy in the hand when it comes to pouring drinks." He sipped, considered, and nodded judicially. "I'm a whiskey man myself but I'd say this is excellent brandy, excellent."

"Oh, I'm so glad," said Bessie. She glanced towards the middle of the room. "There's an American here that would be most interested to meet you. He's gathering impressions of Ireland."

With justifiable dread, Father Hanlon inquired: "To write about us?"

"No," said Bessie, soothingly. "To check up on the accuracy of his Irish authors."

"*That* tribe!" said Father Hanlon, disgustedly. He frowned. "Is he that publisher fellow that's driving the Workhouse Graces all over the country?"

"I believe they *have* gone driving with him occasionally."

"If they've passed me once, they've passed me a hundred times. The pair of them in the back of the car and that mongrel of theirs sitting up in front beside the American!"

Bessie clasped her hands and blinked in a way that made Father Hanlon feel very big and manly. A fine woman for her age, he thought, and a bit of an actress still—which wasn't any harm in a woman, either.

"It must be so wonderful for them to be able to get right away from that dreadful Workhouse sometimes."

Father Hanlon looked at her. Bessie looked back innocently.

"H'm. Yes," said Father Hanlon, and coughed. "Maybe they don't want to get far. H'm!"

"Nuns," said Bessie, blinking and fervent, "are content with so little enjoyment that they put the rest of us to shame."

Father Hanlon said nothing. He was thinking of Reverend Mother, who considered that Peter and Paul could well do with much less enjoyment in the form of driving and who expected him to tell them so. She seemed to disapprove even more of the Zodiac and Mr. Simpson than of Billy and Richard. She disapproved, thought Father Hanlon, suddenly irritated beyond endurance by her remembered perfection, of too much altogether.

"And now," said Bessie, "do come along and tell Mr. Simpson all about the relations of Church and State in Ireland. He wants first-hand information."

Father Hanlon went forward to do good work for Mother Church. He was resolved that as Peter and Paul had doubtless been doing likewise, he wasn't going to stop them, and Reverend Mother could lump it. In some circumstances, it was expedient to put the reactions of publishers above those of Reverend Mothers.

"That midnight blue looks nice on her," said Girlie.

"Looks double the price," said Mrs. Dillon.

"That's her figure. Actually, that frock was nothing in the hand but I knew at once it was *her*. Or she," said Girlie, doubtfully.

Her mother said, fondly: "You've a good dress sense, darling." Mr. Dillon choked on his whiskey.

"Miss Byrne said she knew she could depend on my flair.

Actually, Miss Harrington was all over her when she came in, but Miss Byrne sort of shook her off and grabbed me. A simple, well-cut black dress, that's what she asked for. But, judging by the stock, Miss Harrington seems to have a thing against black. Well, actually she seems to have a thing against anything except what a farmer's wife would wear on Sundays."

"I'd have you remember," said Mr. Dillon, "that much of my profit comes from farmers' wives. And since when have you become so high and mighty in yourself?"

Girlie smiled tolerantly.

"You know I'm completely without class-consciousness, Daddy. I believe in a classless society. I'm simply talking about good taste, which is another thing altogether."

"Whatever you're talking about," said Mr. Dillon, angrily, "you're upsetting Miss Harrington these days and I won't have it."

Girlie shrugged.

"First you were annoyed because you said I wasn't taking any interest in the Stores and now you're annoyed because I am. What *do* you want?"

Mrs. Dillon looked around agonisedly. It was bad enough to have William and Girlie driving her mad at home but to have them driving her mad at Miss Byrne's cocktail party was more than any wife and mother could be expected to suffer. To her horrible family she said, imploringly: "We'll talk about this at home."

"He won't listen to me at home and he has to, here. I want to know where I stand." As Girlie, fluffy and big-eyed, faced her empurpled father, there was a marked similarity in the set of both jaws. "Am I, or am I not, to be allowed do some of the buying?"

"Holy God!" said Mr. Dillon, "all I'm asking is that you won't upset Miss Harrington."

Girlie gave another tolerant smile.

"She won't upset so easily. She knows when she's well off. Besides, I won't interfere with her. My idea is to build up a clientele of my own. I'll need the small showroom for myself, of course." She paused. But all Mr. Dillon said was: "Holy God!"

"I want to evolve a distinctive mood. Miss Byrne said that Christian Dior said once that any good dress shop *does*, whatever the basic style of the moment. If you do something better than anyone else," said Girlie, dreamily, "the world will beat a path to your door."

Mr. Dillon's grip tightened on his glass until his knuckles turned white.

"And who said *that*?"

"Miss Byrne did, when she was ordering a suit from me. Well, actually, by the way she said it, I think someone else might have said it before."

Abruptly, Mr. Dillon inquired: "What's that you're drinking?"

"Martini, I think. It had an olive in it."

Mr. Dillon turned terribly on his wife.

"I was not aware that you allowed your daughter to drink."

But Mrs. Dillon, expecting to be turned on, was ready.

"All she's done yet is to eat the olive. But you're such a bully I suppose you think no one can talk up to you unless they're drunk. It's a nice thing," said Mrs. Dillon, teeming with such hatred for her family as to be reckless of where she was, "when a man accuses his own daughter of drunkenness!"

"All I ask," said Mr. Dillon, brokenly, "is not to have Miss Harrington upset. That's *all*."

"Oh, Daddy darling!" Girlie's little hand rested gratefully on his arm. "Don't worry! I'll be *utterly* tactful. I knew you'd understand when I got a chance to explain properly." She gave his arm a loving squeeze. Mr. Dillon patted the little hand and Mrs. Dillon sighed with relief. "I'm so excited. And George will have ideas about advertising."

Sickened, Mrs. Dillon stared at her imbecile child. Mr. Dillon shook off the filial hand and muttered some indistinguishable words through clenched teeth. His expression spoke all too clearly to Mrs. Dillon, but the imbecile child prattled on. "I mean, *I* can't have MAMMOTH SALE and that sort of awful stuff. In my special showroom, there'll never be even the *smallest* sale. Things will always be *madly* expensive. I'll ask George now to think up something smart and clever." She smiled lovingly towards a glimpse of a grey suit in the distance. "Isn't it heaven for him to have his own kind of people here this evening, like that publisher man and Miss Byrne's B.B.C. friend and the Joyces? People he can really *talk* to." She smiled lovingly at her speechless parent. "Oh, Daddy, I'm so thrilled at actually having a worth-while career to look forward to. While I'm waiting for George, of course."

Like a homing pigeon, she left them. Mrs. Dillon said, hastily: "We must move around, William."

Mr. Dillon remained immovable. At last, with icy detachment, he said: "That girl is a fool."

"Yes," said Mrs. Dillon.

"A thankless fool."

"Yes, William."

Once more, she was ready for what would come next. It came.

"A fine satisfactory daughter you've produced!"

"*We*, dear," said Mrs. Dillon, assuming a bright, sociable face and jabbing him on towards the agent of the Bank of Ireland and his wife.

"Dress Salon, of *course*, George darling. You always have the right words. Well, that's natural, I suppose, darling. And I'll ask for that little side window for my display. They don't need it at all. This week it's just towels and dusters. I'll keep it stark."

"One dress thrown over a chair?"

"Utterly W.1. Ads stark, too, George?"

"We'll start 'em starkish and work up."

"It's so wonderful to have you to help me. George, you don't mind helping me, do you? I mean, if you did, you'd tell me, wouldn't you? I mean because, face it! it is bolstering up the System. Honestly, I'd rather not have a career at all than feel I was being treacherous about the System. But of course it's temporary until I'm twenty-one. *Darling!*"

"Darling!"

"And really one person couldn't do much against the System, anyway, could they? Or even two?"

"Nothing, dearest. The System looks like holding for a while. I think it's very sensible of you to decide to take an interest in the Stores."

"Wasn't it an extraordinary thing the way Miss Byrne came along and sort of inspired me? But, of course, it must have been lying dormant in me all the time. Oh, darling, it's so wonderful how you can come down from your ivory tower and take an interest, too. Just for my sake."

"Well, it's a fine shop, Girlie."

"I suppose writers should stay in touch with all types of humanity, even with shopkeepers. Darling, have you brought your manuscript as Peter and Paul said?"

"I left it outside on the hall table."

"Mr. Simpson looks quite nice, doesn't he?"

"Girlie, I've been checking up on his firm in an Author's Handbook. It says they have an exclusive list—mostly belles-lettres and biographies and so on. And a few novels of distinctive quality."

"Isn't that *perfect*! He'll be so pleased to get yours, darling."

"I hope so, darling."

"Do you think we should start to edge along towards him now? I mean sort of casually in that direction?"

"Do you mind if I have just one more drink before we edge, darling?"

"Hallo, William," said Mr. Higgins, cheerfully. "How're you keeping?"

"All right," said Mr. Dillon, gloomily.

"I was in Dublin yesterday. Intended to drop in to you tomorrow. It's all fixed up—unofficial, of course, but safe as a house. We get our grant, we get our loan, we get our tariff. So all that's left for us to do is sit back and rake in the shekels."

Mr. Dillon heard the good news unsmilingly.

"What about the Workhouse? We don't get that, and until we do we don't get anything."

"A temporary hitch, I'll admit. Couldn't get the fellows up there to budge about that. Blessed Mother Assumpta is the snag, of course. But, after all," said Mr. Higgins, hopefully repeating what so many had been saying for so long, "old Sarah can't live for ever."

Mr. Dillon said, heavily: "Governments don't either."

"This one looks pretty stable. But any government should be glad to bestow its blessing on us. Dammit, man, we're public benefactors! We give Ballykeen an industry, we provide employment, we stem the drift towards the emigrant ship——"

"Maybe we do," said Mr. Dillon, "but if governments have to pay people to do those things, they prefer to pay their friends. I tell you the delay is risky."

"My dear chap, don't brood!" Mr. Higgins raised his glass. "Here's to our glorious future as company directors with expense accounts!"

"Um," said Mr. Dillon.

Mr. Higgins regarded him encouragingly.

"We might consolidate our position by adopting a thoroughly national outlook and insisting that our em-

ployees speak Irish at work. *Cá bfuil St. Brigid, alanna? Tá sí ar an bench, acushla.* You and I, William, all for our native culture and an asset to *any* government!"

Mr. Dillon had been dragged to the Glebe against his will. Nothing that had transpired there had tended to improve his humour. His wife, observing now from across the room his veins stand out, shut her eyes for one horrified moment. Mr. Dillon shut his in the same moment.

"I had an idea—foolish of me, no doubt—that we were discussing a serious matter."

"To tell you the truth," said Mr. Higgins, "the longer I live, the less I can find to be serious about."

"Alice Joyce? The name is familiar."

"Never to more than three thousand, Mr. Hailsham, and I don't think you're one of them."

"I always get out of that one by saying: 'Now that I've met you, I'm looking forward to reading your books.' This time, Mrs. Joyce, I mean it."

"You'll have to wait until you get back home, Hailsham. She's banned in Ireland."

"Really?"

"One ceases to be annoyed, Mr. Hailsham. Indeed, Fred and I have evolved a theory that censorship may be more necessary for the Irish than for other races. It's the only explanation of their need for strict control. Possibly (though one would hardly guess it) they are really dangerously passionate and it takes very little to trigger them off. And when they *get* triggered off, what can they do about it? Mostly nothing, which is most harmful. Better keep them untriggered."

"It's an original theory, Mrs. Joyce, but rather alarming."

"This is an alarming country, Hailsham. Any thinking person is confronted with the choice of becoming a cynic or a lunatic."

"I hope you've managed to evade the issue, so far."

"We hope so, too. But we've got a twelve-year-old daughter to bring up and the responsibility sometimes worries us."

"I imagine a twelve-year-old could be fun."

"She's the most important thing in our lives. You must meet Jane. I don't think we're flattering ourselves by telling you she's something quite out of the ordinary."

"She could hardly be otherwise. Let me get you some sandwiches, Mrs. Joyce, or some of those intriguing little things on toast . . ."

"Waitress, will you please bring some sandwiches to that lady over there."

"How's it going, Mammy?"

"It's like something you'd see on the pictures. More like London or Paris than Ballykeen. All of 'em dressed up and standing around talking. Mrs. Dillon has a gorgeous hat made of kind of little brown straw leaves. Will you plug in the kettle there, Mickey, and we'll have a cup of tea for ourselves."

"The front looks decent, doesn't it?"

"You're a born gardener, child. Ah, it's nice to get the weight off my feet. Not that they bother me the way they used, mind you!"

"You're looking fine, Mammy."

"There was great strengthening in Peter's green pills. Is my hair tidy? One of them Spa waitresses might be in here to the kitchen on top of me for something or other any minute."

"You're as smart as any Spa waitress. You're always tidy now—even your stockings."

"Ah, Mickey, that's no sort of thing to be joking about. But we won't talk about it, lovey. It's all past and gone. And we're happy now, aren't we?"

"We're happy while we're here. It's a pity we ever have to go home."

"God knows, we shouldn't be grumbling. Your father is harmless enough lately."

"He's getting plenty of booze on our wages and he's not such a fool as to want to put a stop to that. I wish he choked on it!"

"Ah, now, lovey, don't be upsetting me! Can't we thank God for being as well off as we are? I nearly forgot to tell you—didn't I hear them talking inside about your peacock!"

"Oh! Did they know what it was?"

"Why wouldn't they know? You'd think, said one of them Grace lady guests, that bush could flap its wings and crow at you any minute."

"Peacocks don't crow."

"What do they do, then?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I suppose she didn't know either."

"I realise, Mr. Simpson, that this must be an intolerable infliction."

"Not intolerable, Mr. Pepper. I have endured it before. Have you brought your manuscript?"

"It's in the hall."

"I'll take it back to the hotel with me. I'd be interested to have your own opinion of it before I read it."

"That wouldn't be of much use to you, surely, sir?"

"None whatever. But it would interest me."

"Well, sir, it's a novel—that is, the first fifty thousand words of a novel. The theme is—I suppose you could call it life in Ballykeen."

"Couldn't that make things rather uncomfortable for you later on, Mr. Pepper?"

"Anything written in Ireland makes things uncomfort-

able for the writer. Of course, the characters are entirely fictitious—only the ideas are factual.”

“You relieve me.”

“Yes, sir. While I’m writing, what I’m writing seems wonderful; when I read it next day, I tear it up. Lately, I don’t read it next day.”

“That must help you to progress. That pretty girl who removed herself so tactfully from us—is that *the* girl, Mr. Pepper?”

“Yes. Over there, that’s *the* father.”

“Peter and Paul have accurate powers of description. I hope that damned book of yours has something, because I want to do whatever I can for those Workhouse match-makers.”

Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O’Donnell, having firmly settled the crippled lady guest, the dull one and the myope on a corner sofa where they could be quietly comfortable together and cause no trouble, had themselves been flitting light-heartedly from group to group. Now, observing Bessie’s Englishman bending over that sofa, they converged on it as rapidly as possible and arrived in time to hear the dull lady guest, under the unusual (and possibly unwise) stimulus of a glass of sherry, comment wonderingly on the long, *long* eyelashes of film stars.

“False, dear,” said Mrs. Murphy, as she and Mrs. O’Donnell took over at once for the honour of the Guest House. “I dare say you know quite a number of film stars, Mr. Hailsham?”

“Look better on the screen than off, maybe, some of ’em. Platter faces!” said the crippled lady guest, with a snorty laugh.

(She, a shy and silent person as a rule, was drinking what appeared to be water from a tall glass. Gin? Definitely unwise.)

To stem any further foolish remarks, Mrs. O’Donnell

began to draw out Mr. Hailsham on his impressions of Ireland. He was charming about Ireland. He was charming altogether in that way Englishmen have which makes one envy Englishwomen. Under his spell, the dull lady guest, when he offered cigarettes, took one and, staring fixedly at him, puffed loud and fast in quite a vulgar manner, though to Mrs. Murphy's certain knowledge tobacco had never touched her lips before.

Major Wagner and Mr. Medlicott, having industriously gone the round of the pretty girls, now arrived at the sofa. The Major's eyes were prominent and indeed it was plain that each liver was suffering hardship this evening. But both men were in wonderful form and chaffed the ladies on their becoming new hats, and though the Major began almost immediately to be nostalgic about his old London club (and better for him, thought Mrs. Murphy, if he'd kept out of it more), Mr. Hailsham tactfully saw to it that the gentlemen did not monopolise the conversation as so often happens in mixed company. When at length the little gathering around the sofa disintegrated, Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell felt justly pleased with themselves, and the three static lady guests were left bridling with pride at their unaccustomed social prowess.

Large cocktail-parties may be noisy, jostling and tiresome, but they offer the supreme advantage of making unobtrusively possible the mutual avoidance of incompatibles. Therefore, when Mr. Dillon and George accidentally met face to face, either could have retreated at once without dishonour into the surrounding crowd. Indeed, instinctively one stepped a pace back, the other a pace sideways, but in the next moment, both stomachs went in, both chests went out, and the two men confronted each other like battling stags.

"You will forgive me," said Mr. Dillon, callously admiring George's tie, "if I say again how pleased I am that we were

finally able to satisfy your requirements. It took some trouble."

George said, sadly: "It must have done."

Meticulously conforming in width of stripe and in shade to his exacting specifications, the specially ordered tie had diabolically reached Dillon's Stores and had been ceremoniously handed over the counter to George. It was pure silk and was still halving his daily cigarette consumption. But George was ever a clean fighter if he thought he could win without cheating and had unflinchingly conceded the point, and thirty-five shillings, to Mr. Dillon.

"Expensive," said Mr. Dillon, clumsily and ungenerously twisting the blade in the wound, "but worth it—I hope?"

"You want the best," said George. "We have it."

"Eh?"

"Everyone," said George, absently, "knows what the well-dressed man wears today. The Stores know what he will wear tomorrow."

"Slick advertising, eh?" Mr. Dillon sneered. "That wouldn't go down in Ballykeen."

George pondered.

"Ever thought of going in more for illustrations? Class stuff. Man on race-course with binoculars and shooting-stick. Man on country road with dog. Dog always gives tone to a man. Town man with girl. Girl gives almost as much tone as dog. But they must be O.K. dogs and O.K. girls. And, of course, O.K. men. Those Technical School drawings you sometimes use just won't do."

Incredibly, Mr. Dillon's chest expanded a further inch.

"My auditors seem to think they've done very well up to now."

"Ah, up to now! But that's the point." George prodded the chest with a fearless forefinger. "We must look to the future. We must increase our production. Then, when we're all producing as much as possible and consuming as little as

possible, everything will be simply splendid. Or so they tell us. It doesn't make sense to me, but they should worry! They're paid to talk."

"Neither you nor I are," said Mr. Dillon, "so I see no reason why we need continue."

He turned with dignity, but George, literally button-holing him, turned with him.

"Have you ever considered employing a really first-class tailor at the Stores? At present, you're sending your good material away to be mass manufactured instead of establishing a reputation for hand-tailored men's suits. Personally," admitted George, "I can only afford to buy mine off the peg, but I know you're losing good trade to Dublin."

"You are stretching my buttonhole, Mr. Pepper."

"I don't think so." George unhanded him. "Excellent worsted!" He sighed. "I hoped you were too big a man to reject suggestions through personal bias."

"Well, I'm not," said Mr. Dillon. "In some ways, I'm a very, very small man indeed. And now that we're here on neutral ground, so to speak, I'm free to tell you that I find you completely insufferable."

"I know you do," George sighed again. "It's a pity because I feel that in other circumstances we could get on quite well."

"It is inconceivable in any circumstances, Mr. Pepper. Is it futile to ask you to keep away from the Stores?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Then I shall need to double my order for pins."

"At least," said George, cheerfully, "Girlie and I will never have to buy another for the rest of our lives together."

"I thought you might like to meet me, Mrs. Dillon. Naturally you might be anxious to know something about me because of Girlie."

"That is considerate of you, Mr. Pepper, but I'm afraid I must leave you. My husband seems to be looking for me."

"Please, Mrs. Dillon! If I got a chance to speak to you, you'd understand. Girlie says you're wonderfully understanding."

"Girlie said that?"

"She says it's more like having a sister than a mother."

"It doesn't sound at all like her. I hope she didn't give you any wrong impression about how I feel about—well, about you?"

"Oh no. Mrs. Dillon, would you tell me why you object to me so strongly? Girlie said you were a big enough person to speak frankly to me."

"Girlie appears to talk quite differently to you than to us. My husband *does* seem to be looking for me. All right, Mr. Pepper. I'll be big and frank. You've no money, you've no background, and I can't understand what Girlie sees in you. I didn't want to be rude, and now I suppose I am, and it's all Girlie's fault."

"I'll have money and background and everything else some day. If I didn't feel confident of that, I'd give up Girlie."

"*She* talks about love in an attic. She's keen on attics."

"I promise you, Mrs. Dillon, you'll never see Girlie in an attic. Doesn't it mean anything to you that we adore each other?"

"Nothing."

"I'd like to have you for a mother-in-law, Mrs. Dillon."

"I know that."

"Apart from Girlie, I'd like to have you yourself in the abstract for a mother-in-law."

"In the abstract is the only way you're likely to have me."

"Oh, Mother, you've been talking to George!"

"George has been talking to me. And now, Girlie, I must explain that to your father."

"Mother, tell me! What *did* you think of George?"

"I think he's too good for you."

"Oh, Mother, *pet!*"

"I mean I think *anyone's* too good for you."

"Playing hard to get, what?" said Mr. Higgins. He seized on Dr. Jim, in brief transit from one group to another and ruthlessly bore him off to a corner. "This doctor-patient relationship's working so strongly this evening I thought I'd never get a word with you."

Dr. Jim leaned one shoulder against the wall and looked down on Mr. Higgins. Several watching admirers were distracted by the beautiful way he leaned, and one lost the thread of her conversation completely.

"I've been telling Dillon we're all fixed up with our Workhouse scheme—all except the Workhouse, of course. Pity about that. There's a lot to be said for euthanasia," remarked Mr. Higgins, thoughtfully.

Dr. Jim played idly with his glass.

"If the Department is fixed, there's no need to worry!"

"My dear chap, we must strike while the iron is hot." Mr. Higgins managed to imbue the phrase with an almost original sincerity. "Dillon was anxious about that. I had to soothe him down, but I agree with him." Dr. Jim said nothing. He looked so grave and handsome and medical that one old lady nearly swooned. Mr. Higgins raised an inquiring eyebrow. "How's the bank balance?"

"Not how, David. Where."

"Ah," said Mr. Higgins sympathetically, "mine's no better. What the hell do we do with it? It's annoying to be squeezed for capital just now." He sighed. "Another little legacy would come in very useful." He stared at Dr. Jim. Dr. Jim stared at his glass. "I've been watching all your old ladies adoring you. Young ones, too. And all," said Mr. Higgins, sighing again, "looking remarkably healthy—thanks to you."

"Some day, David," said Dr. Jim softly, "you'll go too far."

"My dear fellow, if that day ever comes, you needn't go

along with me." Mr. Higgins gazed interestedly around the room. "Big crowd here. Our hostess is doing us well. Patient of yours? Of course. By the way, I had a long chat with your Miss Brown. Faithful soul—perhaps *slightly* unstable, but better keep her around for a while rather than have her going off and being an unstable nuisance from a distance. Besides, it's always worth taking a chance on someone who can spell."

Dr. Jim gave a whimsical look in the direction of his Miss Brown. He suddenly appeared so boyish that two women made straight for him.

"Melly seems to be settling down again. I think she's begun to forgive me for making money."

"Easiest thing in the world to get forgiven for, Jim. How are you, Mrs. Moloney? Where did you find the sun for your glorious tan this weather, Miss Perks?"

"Aha! That's a little secret between Dr. Jim and myself, Mr. Higgins."

"She cheats," said Mrs. Moloney. "It's a lamp."

"Jealous!" said Miss Perks, delightedly.

Adroitly as a prize-winning sheep-dog at Field Trials, Rodney, a glass in either hand, detached Melly Brown from the crowd and penned her into the window embrasure. There he offered her one of the glasses.

"This is a Hailsham Special. I keep them for particular people."

Melly took it, because she had to, and said, awkwardly: "Thanks."

"I've had my eye on you. How you could hope," said Rodney, reprovingly, "to be the life and soul of the party on lemonade, I really don't know."

Melly wriggled like a shy, teased school-girl.

"I couldn't be the life and soul of anything."

"Drink up your Hailsham Special and we'll see!" Melly took a cautious sip. She was careful to avoid gin lately, but

even if there were some in the Special, there seemed to be a lot else as well and no room for much of anything. "Like it?"

"Yes," said Melly. Relaxed, she smiled at him. Melly hated parties. She was deficient in the small talk in which everyone else seemed to excel, and her lumbering attempts at it were shameful in her own ears. Always afraid of hanging on to those who might be too polite to move away, she was quick to be the one to move first and, as a result, vacillated between finding herself conspicuously isolated or hovering in panic on the edge of some group where she might look as if she belonged. But Mr. Hailsham had chosen her out deliberately and made it impossible to leave him without knocking over a pretty little table or him. Melly did not want to leave him. She had never, since Daddy died, met a man with whom she felt so much, and so quickly, at ease. Impulsively, she said: "What's wrong with me is that I've no small talk."

"My dear, I've more than enough for two, but let's not waste time on it."

When the Hailsham Specials were finished, Melly felt almost pretty and was quite well-informed about television. She said, light-heartedly, that at least she had one topic that should carry her on splendidly through several parties to come. Mr. Hailsham struck his forehead and groaned.

"My poor, dear girl, it's fatal to be a good listener. We'll play fair and talk about your job now."

Melly stopped smiling. Her teeth, that had kept out of the way for the past ten minutes, were there the same as ever. She shrugged ungraciously.

"It's a job."

"I won't have you indulging in this modern sentimentality that shies away from sentiment, with your doctor here before my very eyes, the prototype of all noble physicians."

Melly stared across the room at Dr. Jim. His hand-

some head was bent attentively to Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell; he looked grave and kindly and a pillar of strength. Melly kept on staring; Dr. Jim kept on looking grave and kindly and a pillar of strength. The more Melly stared at what she saw, the less it meant to her, and then, so suddenly that she was left shocked and frightened, it meant nothing at all, and what she was seeing was a man like any other man. She gave one last wild stare, searching for something that was lost, something whose going would leave life empty of all meaning, and, turning, incredibly found it now beside her and was shocked and frightened again. 'Oh, dear!' thought Melly, 'it can't happen like this. It must be the Hailsham Special.' Uncomfortably, she moistened her dry lips.

"Surely doctors are out of fashion and scientists in?"

"In *fashion*, darling, but hardly considered *noble* since they took to atom-splitting, would you say?"

He smiled lazily at her. It was all right; even if it wasn't the Hailsham Special, she could be easy and happy with him as before, extraordinary though this seemed.

"Hippocrates and so on, I suppose," she said gaily, because none of this mattered so much any more. "People are so foolish about doctors. They might as well think there aren't any wrong clergymen because of Jesus Christ. And, of course, doctors are far more dangerously powerful than priests, because people are usually more anxious about staying in this world than about securing an agreeable position in the next."

"Whatever made you think you *needed* small talk, Miss Brown? Must I? I'm Rodney."

"I'm Melly," said Melly, contentedly.

"Thank you, Melly. I see some of the crowd's beginning to move off. Bessie told me to ask you if you'd stay and have a meal with us afterwards. Just the three of us." Melly was too astonished to answer. "I warn you it will probably be the leavings hashed up."

Melly looked at him and her heart gave one wild leap. It *wasn't* the Hailsham Special.

"Everything," said Mrs. Murphy, as the Grace lady guests wended their way in a merry bunch down the Glebe avenue, "went off very well."

"Very well. Very, very, *very* well," the myopic lady guest agreed in plain chant.

Mrs. Murphy gave a small cough. To the world in general, she observed that those little drinks were stronger than they looked. Also to the world in general, Mrs. O'Donnell said that once they had had their supper everyone would feel fine.

The crippled lady guest, surprised, said she felt fine already. She said she didn't think she could manage any supper. She said that pale-green mousse was wonderful. Giggling, she said she'd been a regular mousse-trap.

Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell exchanged anxious glances.

"We'd better walk faster." Beginning to do so, Mrs. Murphy said, with a touch of desperation: "We've the whole town to get through yet."

The dull lady guest suddenly looked happy.

"There are cigarettes in town. We'll buy cigarettes in town."

"No, dear," said Mrs. Murphy, patiently. "None of us smokes."

The dull lady guest looked stubborn.

"I do. I smoke beautifully."

"The air," Mrs. O'Donnell said. "I'm sure the fresh air will help."

The dull lady guest halted abruptly beside the peacock and, regardless of her white glove, punched him in the stomach.

"Fly, bird!"

Chapter Ten

Watching the last of the party guests go down the Glebe Avenue, Melly nervously wished she were with them. She had done very well for a while over the Hailsham Specials, but she couldn't hope to hold the course for several hours. But she did hold and, when at eleven o'clock he walked back with her to Ocean View, he still seemed to want her company.

It was one of those wonderful things that happen to other people, but never before to Melly Brown.

Everything was wonderful that evening. From the foolishly dreaded moment when she was left alone with Miss Byrne and Rodney, not once did Melly feel shy or unhappy and not once had she, suddenly stricken dumb, to send her mind scuttling frantically through the alphabet (A for Apes, Art . . . B for Boys, Bottles . . . sometimes even on to J or K) for a subject, *any* subject, to offer.

Miss Byrne set Rodney and her to tidy the room while she went to see how Mrs. Coyle was coping with supper. She soon came back and said that Mrs. Coyle was doing fine, and there would be a solid meal of chops and potatoes and tinned peas and plenty of dribs and drabs to wash it down with, anyway. By the time every ash-tray was emptied and cushion plumped up, Miss Byrne was Bessie to Melly. Before supper, she brought Melly to her bedroom, where Melly, doing her best with lipstick and powder at the dressing-table mirror, had her only twinge of uneasiness.

"You've got good cheek-bones," said Bessie, studying her. "If I had 'em, I'd try a touch of rouge slanting outwards for that mysterious Eastern look."

Melly gave a hoarse little laugh.

"It's hard to look mysterious with teeth like mine."

"Don't you believe it, ducks! Rodney thought you were the dead spit of Lady Macbeth." Melly stared in the mirror. "Bloody, bold and resolute," said Bessie, chuckling. "Looked to *me* as if you were sulking. You're nicer cheered." She took up a pot of rouge. "Let's have a go. I'm an old hand."

When Bessie had finished, Melly's sallow skin had a peachy glow, she had slanting colour on her cheeks and red lips instead of orange.

"For God's sake," said Bessie, throwing the orange lipstick aside in disgust, "give up the autumn symphony effect! And why not be a devil and treat the hair to a few highlights?" She patted her own ruefully. "I try to keep myself restrained, but I can't resist the teeniest dash with every shampoo."

"I had grey hairs at thirty," said Melly sadly.

"Life's a brute to women. There's Rodney without a single one at forty, the wretch!"

"Forty?" Melly gazed at the woman in the mirror. "Oh! He's the same age as I am. I thought he was younger."

Smiling, she left the woman in the mirror and stood up. Bessie began to arrange the cosmetics on the dressing-table.

"Rodney's not interested in girls. He likes 'em and gets on well with them, but that's all." She put two glass bowls carefully side by side. "See what I mean, ducks?"

With a little gasp of gratitude to Bessie for trying to give her confidence by explaining that immaturity had no appeal for Rodney, Melly said: "Yes," and, her heart singing, followed Bessie downstairs.

In the drawing-room, Bessie showed some of her old press-cuttings and photographs ("We were all fore and aft in those days, Melly. Only fore now.") and, on the dining-room mantelpiece, her mascot china lizard in the place of honour in the centre and lucky sovereign, half-sovereign and crown piece in a Dresden box. When they sat down to the chops (tough, but no one minded), all three were old friends.

"And now," said Rodney, "let's be cads and tear the guests to shreds."

"Fire away, ducks, as long as you keep off my old ladies."

"My dear! They're utter pets."

Cheerfully sawing at her meat, Bessie said: "I bet Melly's too sweet to join in your horrid game."

"Bitter-sweet," said Rodney, reflectively. "Just right."

Melly blushed.

Five minutes later, Bessie told them both, severely, to remember their manners and stop giggling.

"You're encouraging each other. I never guessed, Melly Brown, that you could be so skittish."

"It's me," said Rodney. "Taken in large doses, I'm overwhelming."

Bessie said, grimly, that Mrs. Coyle had a lovely rice-pudding in waiting, and he could laugh *that* off.

When Melly left with Rodney for Ocean View, sea and sky were mingling together mistily on the horizon and the moon was coming up over the convent headland. It was quiet on the road from the Glebe, except for the muted sounds from the town ahead and, once, the keen of a swerving curlew. As they strolled along, Rodney was serious now. He spoke of Bessie. She was supposed, he said, to take things easily, but Bessie didn't even know the meaning of the word. She'd be liable to do the can-can just for the hell of it, if she felt that way.

"When I'm gone, try to keep her in order, will you, Melly dear? But I'll be here for a while yet. We'll be seeing plenty more of each other. You and I get on comfortably, don't you think?"

Melly said: "Yes," and gazed at the moon.

It was quiet, too, on the streets of the town when they came down to it, though music blared yet from the promenade beyond. But 'Rosslyn', 'The Nook' and 'The

Beeches' were already sleeping and only one gleam from the top window of Ocean View showed where George Pepper worked still at his dissecting slab. Melly stood with her hand on the gate, looking again at the moon.

George's shadow moved on the blind as if he prowled around inside for inspiration. Rodney bent, laid his cheek gently to Melly's, and went. Melly, clinging to the gate, watched him go.

Next morning, Dr. Jim's surgery was so unusually light that his last fortunate patient to enter got her full two guineas' worth of attention. Melly minded Mrs. Baily's Yorkshire terrier while his mistress was having her period of blissful chatter which she could enjoy only here, since no one else was paid to listen to her.

It was quite unnecessary for Melly to mind Pettens, who was well accustomed to minding himself in Dr. Jim's waiting-room once a week, and she could profitably have employed the interval in writing up the accounts book, but instead she put Pettens on a chair, sat opposite him on another and gazed at him in a happy dream. Petten's silky top-knot, fastened on his forehead with a perky red ribbon, gave him a foppish air, but he had a knowing face and bright, sharp eyes and was really a great one for rats. As Melly continued to stare, he gave one short, threatening growl.

Melly woke up and said, soothingly: "Pettens!"

The excellent ratter threw back his top-knot and uttered a tiny, plaintive wolf-howl.

"I know," said Melly. "It's a shame. Good dog, Boxer! Good dog, Fearless! Good dog, Rags!"

Mrs. Baily, coming contented from her doctor, found Boxer, Fearless or Rags raging around the waiting-room after an old leather glove pulled along the floor on a string by the doctor's secretary. She beamed on Melly.

"Everyone adores Pettens. He's so playful."

Breathlessly straightening herself, Melly said: "He's too fat."

"Fond of his food." Mrs. Baily stooped with difficulty and gathered Pettens to her bosom. "Like his mistress. Dr Jim went to enormous trouble writing out a diet for me——" Melly nodded. She had typed the diet sheet which had seemed to her liberal—"but I'm so naughty I couldn't keep to it. The doctor was *very* cross, but he forgave me at last, and now he's giving me pills instead. They're *much* easier."

"Pills are always easier."

Mrs. Baily snuggled her chin on the plummy top-knot.

"I might try some on Pettens."

"It would be an awfully good idea," said Melly, gaily, "to try one on the dog."

Blithe and carefree, she brought a cup of coffee and two digestive biscuits to the surgery. As some look their best on horseback, Dr. Jim (although looking good everywhere) looked his best behind a desk with stethoscope by his fine, strong hand. Melly watched him reach out a fine, strong hand for a biscuit. It didn't mean a thing to her. He smiled. It could have been anybody smiling.

"No more Mrs. Baily for another week, thank God!"

"She may want you to see Pettens. He won't keep to his diet either."

Dr. Jim nibbled a biscuit thoughtfully.

"I doubt if I could be as beneficial to Pettens as to his owner."

"Possibly not." Melly placed the cup carefully beside him. "Mrs. Baily says he's a most intelligent dog."

Dr. Jim leaned back in his chair and laughed with genuine enjoyment.

An hour later, Melly opened the door to Rodney. He smiled. Warmly and confidently, she smiled back. Then Rodney's smile suddenly went as he began to speak and a

small, sick feeling curled and writhed like a fog in the pit of Melly's stomach.

"Bessie's had a bad attack. Could Dr. Smith-Crowley come at once?"

Melly's reaction was slow. She took a step backwards into the hall, and stared. It was an appreciable while before she said: "Oh!" Then, with a silly little laugh, she said, stumbly: "Of course, I know he attended her when she was taken ill at the Spa Hotel, but I thought, since she got so friendly with the Workhouse Graces, that they might have recommended some other doctor." She stopped. With another silly little laugh, she said: "He's in now. I'll tell him."

Melly sat on the edge of her chair and looked fixedly at the Workhouse Graces.

"Miss Byrne is being moved to the Sancta Maria. Well, being friends of hers, I thought she'd like you to know. I just thought I'd run up and tell you."

Peter said: "That's very kind of you."

"I thought you might like to know. She has no one belonging to her," said Melly, carefully and distinctly. "Mr. Hailsham isn't a relative. So really she's very much alone in the world—except for her friends."

"I'm sure," said Paul, cheerfully, "the Grace lady guests won't let her feel lonely."

Melly looked away from the two stupid nuns. Then, making one final effort, she gave a forced laugh.

"I'm so ashamed of the state I was in the last time I met you. You were very good to be so patient with me. I'm sure I talked my head off." She paused. "What *did* I say?"

"Nothing of any consequence," Peter said, politely.

Melly could have hit her. When she left, after a few more inane minutes, the stupid white dog barked her out.

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"Whatever you want," said Mrs. Magee, "just let me know at once."

Bessie plomped down on the edge of the bed. It was soft and covered with a pink silk quilt. The floor carpet was pink and soft, too. The wardrobe, dressing-table and bedside table, which held a white telephone, were of modern design in walnut. The Sancta Maria prided itself on its luxury hotel, rather than hospital, atmosphere, and all unpleasant functional reminders of mortality were cleverly concealed in each room in an inset closet, the narrow door of which, flush with the wall, was a full-length mirror.

"I'll be so snug here you'll find it hard to shift me," said Bessie, cheerfully.

"We'll have you out and about in no time, you'll see. Just you pop into bed now. Will I give you a hand? Righty-o! I'll leave you alone, then, and when I think you're safe and sound I'll pop up with a cup of tea. I'm specialling you myself."

"Well, what do you know!" said Bessie. "Aren't I the lucky girl!"

Mrs. Magee's long nose slid sideways in an arch smile.

"All Dr. Jim's patients are lucky girls: Something very 'homey' about him, isn't there?"

"That's the word," said Bessie.

"Maybe it's indiscreet of me to say so—well, I have to make my living with *all* the doctors—but there's no one like him. Great man for hearts, too. Let's see how the pulse is, dear!"

"Rotten, I think," said Bessie.

Mrs. Magee gave a little scolding tap to Bessie's wrist.

"That's naughty talk! Dr. Jim is right up to the minute with all the new treatments. You wait until he gets at you, and you'll soon be feeling fit to jump over the moon."

Left alone, Bessie stared at the closet mirror. Then she winked encouragingly at herself and kicked off her shoes.

"You look better, Step-mamma," said Rodney.

"My heart isn't jumping out of my throat any longer. It's gone right back here," said Bessie, patting her chest happily.

Rodney wriggled in the Sancta Maria arm-chair, pulled a pink cushion from under him, a blue one from behind him, threw them on the carpet and fitted himself in more securely.

"Sybaritic, this place is! I'll be moving in with you if I have to stand much more of Mrs. Coyle's cooking."

"It's not Mrs. Coyle, ducks; it's the butcher. It's wholesome," said Bessie, callously, "and you're thriving on it." Rodney took out his cigarette-case. "And you needn't think you'll pay me back that way, young Rodney, because if I'm not allowed to smoke, I'm damned if you'll smoke in front of me!"

Rodney said, reprovingly: "You're off cue, darling. Aren't you the gentle, considerate old invalid?"

"I take a break with you." Bessie sighed. "Otherwise, I'm part of the general sweetness and light." She paused reflectively. "Mind you, Dr. Jim really *has* charm—lucky for him, because I think it has to do instead of brains, poor man. But he keeps on doing things to me. I don't mind bottles——" She glanced at the closet door—"I've a new one—green—from Germany. Very pretty. But all that prodding is a nuisance."

"I suppose the man feels he must justify his bills."

"When he sits down and talks, he almost justifies them. I do wish," said Bessie, plaintively, "I could tell him so."

"I just thought I'd look in to see how you were," said Melly.

Her looking in to the Sancta Maria was in no way remarkable, as it occurred daily. She always arrived at unexpected hours; she always, as now, prowled around restlessly, looking sullen and making little attempt at proper sick-room conversation.

"I'm much better."

"Um," said Melly. "Rodney said you were." She opened the closet door. "What's that green stuff?"

"That's my new tonic."

Melly stepped into the closet, pushed aside a bed-pan with one foot and peered at the shelves lining the walls. Coming out, she gave another push to the bed-pan and slammed the mirror door so roughly that Bessie winced.

"Sorry!" Melly slouched over to the bed and stared down morosely. "You seem all right. Are you sleeping all right?"

"Wonderfully. Of course, they give you things, otherwise it mightn't be so easy, lying in bed all day."

"Oh, they do, do they? Did they say when you'd be going home?"

"Dr. Jim wants to keep me longer for rest and observation. I don't mind," said Bessie brightly. "I'm well pampered."

Melly lowered at her absent-mindedly. Then, obviously recollecting her role of visitor, she plunged into it with disconcerting suddenness.

"It may rain later, but I don't think so."

"Oh, I hope it won't," said Bessie.

Mrs. Murphy pulled the wrappings off her parcel and held it aloft.

"We all clubbed together for this. They say there's nothing better for the digestion."

"Vintage," said Mrs. O'Donnell, proudly, "*and* château. The Major advised us."

"And Mrs. Magee said you could have a glass right off."

News was being pleasantly exchanged over three glasses of champagne when Mrs. Magee came in. She said we were almost too popular for our own good, with the hordes of visitors we were constantly having. Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell got up to leave, but Mrs. Magee said they could have ten minutes more, and herself stayed with them,

amiably chatting. At last she said, sliding her nose sideways at Bessie, that Dr. Jim's best girl must have her little rest now, and maybe her friends would pop in again tomorrow.

Bessie watched them go. Then she waved her empty glass at Mrs. Magee and said: "Aren't they dears? Mrs. Magee, could you get Mr. Higgins along to make my will?"

Mrs. Magee laughed heartily at the very idea, but all the same, she admitted it was sensible in a way because with even the strongest of us you never could tell, could you? and it was plain enough what had prompted the notion so suddenly, and certainly those two dear old things would be flattered that somebody wished to remember them, and even though it was most unlikely, please God! that they'd ever have the opportunity of knowing about whatever little tokens or mementoes they'd been put down for, still, it was the thought that counted, wasn't it?

Mr. Higgins came later and took Bessie's instructions. He promised to return on Saturday with the typescript of the completed will for signature. He went downstairs with an unguarded face, surprised, respectful and thoughtful, which he remembered to readjust only at the last moment before stepping out on the street.

Next day, Bessie's condition had deteriorated and visitors were forbidden. Dr. Jim spoke gravely to Rodney in the waiting-room, and Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell, bringing flowers sent by Reverend Mother, were spoken to gravely in the hall by Mrs. Magee.

Bessie slept most of the day now as well as the night. She was comfortable but always drowsy. Sometimes, when she was awake and alone, she went under the bed-clothes and sang a verse or two of some old music-hall song to keep her spirits up.

Chapter Eleven

The Grace boarding-school usually ended the scholastic year with a concert for pupils' parents and friends of the Order. This summer it was ending it more ambitiously with *Hyppola, the Roman Maid*.

Jane was up early on the morning of *Hyppola* and called Margaret, who had overslept again. She also called her parents. These, although awakened at an unnatural hour, were patient with their only child and blinked kindly from their beds.

"Try to get the *feel* of your part, J J."

"I doubt if the nuns teach the Method, Alice."

They were terrible. A wiser child would have let them lie.

"There's no feel in my part, Mummy. I'm one of the Roman centurions—I just stand at the back and don't speak." The school had been scoured to the dregs for dramatic talent. Jane was dregs. She knew it and cared nothing. "It's Pompey, remember?"

On his recovery from the ravaging visit of the economist and her husband, Jane had brought Pompey, once more sleek and calm, to show him to the convent. He had been a tremendous success. Nuns and girls had doted on him, and even Reverend Mother had remarked, benignly, that he looked a healthy cat. It followed naturally that when Mother Eucharist, the Arts Mistress and stage producer, driven to distraction by her task of casting ancient Romans from modern adolescent Irish, had had to consider filling the part of the lion cub, her thoughts had turned, at once and gladly, to Pompey.

"The Dublin Graces," said Jane, scornfully, "did *Hyppola*

last year, and all they had was a stuffed toy. The lion cub has only to lie on a velvet cushion, but it makes an awful difference having a live one, because he's a focal-point, really."

Unsuccessfully, her father tried to conceal a yawn.

"If lying on a cushion is all Pompey has to do, he won't be any more focal than you."

"His presence underlines the whole theme, Daddy. He's a constant reminder that Christians are being eaten in the arena."

"It *would* be that kind of play!" said her mother.

Her father laughed.

"Pompey'll need a damn small Christian."

"Cubs weren't expected to eat them." To her mother, Jane said: "The play was chosen because it's very suitable on account of no trousers. We're not allowed to wear them. So it's convenient that the Roman men wore skirts."

Her mother asked sharply: "What's wrong with trousers?"

"They're not modest."

"Skirts," said her father, yawning again, "didn't do all that much for the modesty of ancient Rome," but her mother said, "It's nothing to joke about, Fred. Don't use that horrible word, J.J.!"

It was always difficult to reconcile home and school, but Jane invariably did her honest best to explain the workings of the normal mind to her parents.

"I think the word you don't wish me to use, Mummy, makes things more interesting, in a way. For example, the Grace boarders have to take their baths in bathing-suits." Aghast, her mother stared at her. Her father stopped yawning. "That's so they won't see themselves. Well, I don't think that matters—I mean, they must know how they look, after all—but it makes having a bath more exciting." Slightly wistful at the unattainable joys of convent bathing, Jane said: "It's almost as good as going swimming."

Her mother sat up straight in bed.

"We should have made a change from that convent long ago, Fred."

"The child will forget all that nonsense quickly enough."

"I certainly hope so. You do know, J.J. darling, that we should be proud of our bodies? The human body," said Mrs. Joyce devoutly, "is a very beautiful thing."

"I prefer cats." Suddenly Jane was struck with horror. "That Meath school isn't nudist, is it?"

"No, darling."

"That's good."

"But, darling, you *do* understand——"

"Oh, yes, about us being beautiful. But it would be very cold. It wouldn't matter if we were furry." She could waste no more time on them. Pompey had yet to be groomed. "Are you coming to the play this afternoon?"

Mr. and Mrs. Joyce exchanged worried glances.

"Well, darling, you know we *did* think of making an early start."

"We have a long journey and I'm not so sure of the car clutch. But, of course, if you really want us to go, J.J.——"

No one in her senses would want the stigma of being related to a red beard in the audience. Besides, Jane was doubtful if, even in the convent, either the conversation or the conduct of her parents could be trusted. But all parents were invited and she had had to give hers their chance.

"I don't mind at all if you're not there. Actually, it might make Pompey nervous to see you in front."

"Then we won't disturb Pompey," said her father, thankfully.

"We'll be gone when you get back from the convent, J.J., but we'll be longing to hear all about *Hyppola* when we come back on Monday morning."

Jane looked at them. They were driving to the North to stay with friends (a dull man and woman who couldn't get

married because each was already married to someone else), but she knew that on their way they were calling to make arrangements for her at that frightful place in Meath. Although Pompey was still ungroomed and breakfast uneaten, Jane delayed for the final of many efforts.

"About that school, Mummy——"

"Darling, we told you if you don't like it, you needn't stay."

"All we want you to do is to try it for a term, J.J."

It was no use.

"So this is my last day at the convent. I hope," said Jane, politely, "you'll have a nice journey. Good-bye, Mummy. Good-bye, Daddy."

Margaret was in great good humour at breakfast. Jane knew she was looking forward to three days of glorious freedom with her master and mistress safely out of the way. The house would be dirty and the meals worse than ever or probably Jane would have to cook her own, for it was unlikely that Margaret, despite Mrs. Joyce's careful instructions, would frequent her place of employment in this fine weather except for sleeping. But now Margaret had done Pompey's steak very nicely (he was having a balanced meal of protein and carbohydrate) and said, as she put it beside his saucer of water, that she was sure he would knock 'em all cold at the convent.

"He came to one rehearsal." Jane watched to see that Pompey did not eat too fast. "Mother Eucharist said he was the most intelligent in the play." The distraught nun had actually stated that the cat was the only one with any intelligence whatever, but Jane did not care to seem too boastful. "He even roared a little in a lionish way."

"Isn't he great?" Margaret smiled down insincerely at Pompey. "What time'll you be home, Jane?"

"About seven, I think."

"Look, I'll leave the door on the latch if I'm not here."

There's a bitta cooked ham in the pantry. You be a good girl and put yourself to bed at the right time, wontcha? And I wouldn't be surprised," said Margaret, archly, "if there mightn't be a peppermint bar waiting on someone's pillow."

Pompey's grooming took half an hour. At the end of it he looked magnificent. Jane put him into a padded basket (to-day he could not be allowed to fatigue himself by walking) and carried him off.

The convent had an air of bustle and confusion instead of its usual cloistral calm. Nuns and pupils were rushing around with chairs and flower vases and everybody was telling everybody else what to do. Jane was given a book by Mother Eucharist and put sitting quietly with Pompey, who must not be over-excited. People were constantly coming up to talk to her and Pompey, and Mother Eucharist (ever concerned for Pompey, who would show those Dublin Graces what was what) was as constantly coming to shoo them away. Jane found it difficult to concentrate on *The Waterways of England*, which Mother Eucharist had chosen in haste and at random from the library, and at last put down her book and sat sadly watching the Grace nuns and girls—all ordinary people—running around, and thinking that next September there would be nothing but progs running around her, spoiling for ever any hope she might have of being an ordinary person herself. She felt miserable.

After midday dinner—special today, with rhubarb tart and whipped cream—she felt better because there was no time for thinking of anything but *Hyppola*. She put on her kilt and jacket and cloak and laced the thongs of her shoes over the cotton stockings which the centurions were primly wearing. Then she collected her cardboard helmet and shield and her spear and presented herself for inspection to Mother Eucharist.

It was a glorious moment when the red velvet cushion was

set before the Emperor's couch and Pompey, a paper mane now ingeniously fastened to his neck, was taken from his basket and laid on it, close to the footlights. Jane, giving him a last encouraging pat, whispered: "Don't move!" Everyone on-stage had to whisper now because, beyond the curtains, the unseen audience were already in their places. "It doesn't matter," Mother Eucharistia hissed, "if he walks around a little, as long as he doesn't rub his mane off. He looks *wonderful*." Jane, her heart swelling with pride in Pompey and gratitude to Mother Eucharistia, stepped back into the ranks of the centurions, the Emperor reclined on his couch, his pagan court gathered around him, the Christian maid, Hyppola, was pushed sideways to where the spotlight overhead would shine on her, and the curtains parted flawlessly.

Jane stared straight ahead as she was supposed to do. The hall was full. In the middle of the front row of chairs, the Bishop sat between Reverend Mother and the Mistress of Novices, with more nuns and priests ranged in order of importance on either side. Behind was the laity and, at the very back against the wall, the lesser members of the Grace community were seated on forms. Here Jane's searching gaze found Peter and Paul. They smiled and Paul gave a little wave of the hand and Jane answered by closing and opening her eyes twice. She knew they would be there; they had promised to come to see Pompey. She had gone to the Workhouse twice since that first visit; Peter and Paul knew all about Meath now, and all about Pompey. Jane knew all about Tim.

When the Emperor and his court, who had stood up and walked around at the beginning, settled down for an orgy of drink and music and singing, Jane was able to catch sight of Pompey over their heads. He was asleep on his cushion. He stayed asleep during the entire orgy, from which Hyppola, stationary under the spotlight, remained aloof, implicitly

expressing her disapproval of such licentiousness at the end of the act with a hymn.

During the second act, Pompey left his cushion at exactly the right moment. It was obvious now that the Emperor was passionately enamoured of Hyppola. His wooing started off confidently with offers of jewels and many other luxuries, but, as Hyppola's sole acknowledgment of his generosity was to turn up her eyes to the spotlight and sing another hymn, his tactics altered and, with an evil laugh, he pointed to his pet lion cub whose relatives had added, and were adding, so many to the glorious army of martyrs. It was then that the inspired cat rose, stretched himself, stepped off his cushion and, muttering gently, sauntered towards Hyppola. A shiver of horror ran through the audience as the curtains fell and Mother Eucharistia rushed on stage and embraced Jane.

Pompey slept again for most of the third act while the Emperor, whose intentions were now strictly honourable, offered Hyppola an Empress's crown. When it turned out that the Christian maid, having already made a vow of chastity, was as little inclined to accept this as any of his previous suggestions, the frustrated man lost his patience completely and called on two centurions to drag the annoying girl to the arena where the lions were then busy. In the event, he had to summon a third centurion, one of the original pair being Hyppola's erstwhile pagan admirer who suddenly became converted to Christianity as Hyppola sang her final hymn. While the intrepid maid and the ex-centurion, hand-in-hand, were walking off between their guards to the sound of more evil laughter from the Emperor, Pompey woke up. He turned his head towards Jane, and she saw that he had wholly entered into the spirit of his part. He wore the pensive and slightly apologetic expression befitting a cub whose parents were devouring Christians somewhere out of sight. He turned back to the audience and

Jane was not surprised at the wild burst of applause when the curtains came together.

"Oh, what a cat!" said Mother Eucharía. "Jane, what a cat! Girls, you were all splendid, but what a cat!"

Reverend Mother, when Jane went later to her private office to say good-bye, told her that the Bishop had been delighted with Pompey and had asked that his congratulations should be passed on to Pompey's owner.

"I'm glad the Bishop liked him." Jane looked at Pompey, now on his lead, for after the extreme conservation of his strength prior to his performance he needed exercise. "He had a balanced breakfast, but Mother Eucharía gave him a very stodgy dinner, because she thought it would be best to have him weighed down during the play. It might have turned out dangerous, but Pompey has a good stomach and it turned out well and just weighed him."

"Except," said Reverend Mother, "for his few dramatic moments."

"It was a nice play. From now on," said Jane gloomily, "any plays I'll be in will probably be Greek things about incest."

Reverend Mother, sitting very straight behind her desk, looked through her and said, in a chill voice: "Jane!"

Jane sighed. She knew that look and that voice. They had happened often. It meant she had used a wrong word again. She tried to explain that when the same word could be wrong here and right at home, and also the other way round, a person tended to get mixed. Reverend Mother said nothing, though looking at Jane now instead of through her.

"It will be a great relief for you," said Jane, wretchedly, "when I'm in Meath. You were very kind to let me come to school here, so that you could save my soul, but it must have worried you that I might be causing other girls to lose theirs, which, of course, would have made it not worth while at all."

Still Reverend Mother, frowning, was silent. Pompey arched his back and yawned. Reverend Mother bent and stroked him absent-mindedly.

"You'll hardly have any trouble with words in your new school, Jane."

"I expect all words will be right there. I expect there won't really be any proper rules."

"That will be wonderful freedom for a little girl."

Jane stared at her. It was kind of Reverend Mother to try to be consoling, but a child must face facts.

"It will be terrible."

Reverend Mother stopped patting Pompey, folded her hands on the desk and studied them intently.

"Your mother tells me she is quite sure you will be very happy."

Jane said, sadly: "When you're young, people won't take any notice of what you say. I think they mean well, but I don't understand how they can feel so sure they know what's best for another person, even if she is young, because how can anyone feel sure about anyone else when it's so hard to feel sure even about oneself?"

"It is difficult," said Reverend Mother.

"They say I'll develop in that Meath place, but I was trying to develop here. It was only in the way *I* wanted to develop, however, not the way they wanted me to."

Reverend Mother said, levelly: "We are sorry to lose you."

"Are you?" Jane was surprised. "In spite of words and all that and me not being able yet to believe much in God?"

"You were a satisfactory pupil."

"Then I *must* have been developing. Isn't it a pity I have to go? What I'd like," said Jane, dreamily, "is to be a boarder here and then I could be ordinary all the time." Pompey circled her feet and tied her up in his lead. Disentangling it, she sought to comfort herself by contemplating the sole alleviation of the dismal future. "But then Pompey would

miss me. They allow pets in that Meath place, and he's coming too."

"Even that," said Reverend Mother, amazingly, "might have been arranged here."

"Oh! It makes everything worse to know that."

"Oh, my dear child," Reverend Mother said, in a voice Jane had never heard from her before. "*I wish* we weren't losing you!" Suddenly she looked angry. Then, as suddenly, her face was tranquil again. "Good-bye, Jane, and God bless you! Come to see us as often as you can."

"What I'm afraid of," said Jane, despairingly, "is that that Meath place will make me the kind of person that won't want to come to see you. At my age, a person is supposed to be awfully susceptible to environment."

Jane found the Cottage door on the latch. The cooked ham in the pantry was old and had turned dark red in patches, but she was hungry and ate it. It didn't taste too bad, but it wasn't good enough for Pompey. Fortunately, after a long search, she got a tin of salmon behind the bread-bin. Probably Margaret had hidden it here for herself, and she would be angry at Pompey getting it, but he deserved it far more than she. From the state of the Cottage, it was plain that Margaret hadn't done any work all day.

After supper, Jane took Pompey to the beach. They had to stop quite often for Pompey to be congratulated; there was no doubt he had become a most famous cat. In spite of his trying day, he stood still politely and allowed himself to be patted by all the strange hands. Jane was sorry for him, because he could hardly be expected to understand that he was paying the price of fame. She was paying it for him too, of course, and she was so tired and sad it was more difficult than usual to listen to the foolish remarks people make to children and cats.

Even on the beach, people came congratulating, so she

took Pompey up in her arms and set off to the sand-hills at the farthest end of the beach, away from the promenade and the fish and chips and ice-cream and Hurley's amusements and the Ocean Dance Hall and all the things that attracted the crowds. At this late hour of evening the sand-hills would, with any luck, be deserted. Soon, she and Pompey were alone in a world of little soft mountains, with the strong sea-grass bending and creaking in a small breeze and a battered, unlighted old moon coming up over the bay. She settled herself with her back to a sand-hill and looked at the moon, and thought. Pompey looked at the moon for a while (probably thinking, too) and then he went to sleep.

She thought until the sky had faded to blue-grey and the moon brightened and the breeze become cold. The sand-hills seemed to have got bigger and higher and the blades of the sea-grass were grating against one another like swords. Night did things like this. It was time to go home.

Taking a short cut through the sand-hills, she said poetry to Pompey in her arms, and Pompey muttered back companionably.

"There is a pleasure in the pathless woods, Pompey." Sea-grass suddenly and viciously switched her bare ankles. Pompey spoke a long sentence. "There is a rapture on the lonely shore. There is society where none intrudes," said Jane, and, running around a sand-hill, tumbled over some legs and let Pompey fall. Someone cursed and Pompey screamed angrily, and two people sat up and looked at Jane, who had quickly jumped to her feet again. One of them was Margaret. Her hair was tousled. Her clothes were untidy. Her face was untidy, too. The other one was a man. He had long oily hair and a lot of it was hanging over his forehead. He had a damp face. He had damp red lips. He said: "Can't you bloody well look where you're going, you —ing little brat!"

Margaret's head, with all that tufted hair, bent out from

her neck towards Jane. Medusa, thought Jane, stooping for Pompey and holding him tight.

"You're a beauty, ain't ye, comin' snoopin' after us to see what you could see! Outa luck, though, weren't ye?"

Jane held Pompey very tight.

"I'm sorry, Margaret. I didn't think anyone would be here. I hope I didn't hurt you."

"More than you know, kiddy!" said the man, and laughed loudly.

"Shut up, you! She's one of 'em. Jane."

The man gave a long whistle.

"Trouble, eh?"

"Ach, no. I wouldn't say them ones would mind you-know-what." They both laughed loudly now. They seemed, Jane saw thankfully, to be getting better-humoured. "But I'm supposed to be mindin' the house. Never think the likes of *me* need a breath of fresh air at all." Pulling her clothes together and patting down her hair, Margaret smiled her false smile at Jane. "But Jane's no sneak, so she isn't."

"That's fine," said the man.

"I shouldn't a' been cross with you, Jane, but you give us a start. Me an' my friend took a long walk on account of it being such a lovely evening and we was kinda tired an' restin' here when you woke us up."

"That's the idea," said the man. "Resting."

He kept on looking at Jane. It made her feel uncomfortable. Maybe it was because his face was so damp.

"But my goodness, gracious me, Jane!" said Margaret. "It's gone your bed-time."

"I'm going straight home, Margaret."

"Well, *I* won't tell tales and *you* won't tell tales, what?" Jane shook her head. "So no harm done. Off with you now and into bed the minute you get back, and I won't be long after you."

"Here!" said the man. "Get yourself some sweets for being a good girl." He held out a half-crown. Jane would have preferred not to take it, but he was being kind, really. When she went over to him, he rubbed his hand down her leg. It gave Jane a queer feeling up her back and front. "I suppose you *are* a good girl, eh?"

"Get on home, Jane!" said Margaret sharply.

Jane hurried on with Pompey over the lonely places of the strand. She was breathless when she got to the promenade, and Pompey was scolding because he had had rather a bumpy journey. She went into the nearest kiosk and spent the half-crown on fish and chips and ice-cream to cheer them both when they got home. Coming out, with Pompey now at her heels on the lead, their way was barred by two boys. One was bigger than Jane; the other, who had a cigarette butt behind his ear, was about the same size.

"Give us a sweet!" the boy with the cigarette said.

Jane moved sideways to avoid them. They moved sideways, too.

"Aw, come on! Be a sport!"

"Would you have e'er a fag on you, duckie?"

Two women were approaching. Jane waited patiently.

"What's you so stuck-up about, anyway, yerself an' yer bloody ferret?"

"He's no ferret," the boy with the cigarette said. "He's a stinkin' little weasel."

"He's a cat," said Jane. "Siamese."

The boy with the cigarette sneered.

"He's the rottenest-lookin' cat I ever seen."

He kicked at Pompey and missed. Jane dropped her parcel and Pompey's lead, feinted with her right, led with her left and hit the boy with the cigarette in the stomach. The boy yelped and doubled up, but he straightened himself immediately and both boys made a grab for Pompey, who leaped back, stiffened and spat. The women were still some distance

away, so it was fortunate that the Coyle boy, from the foot of Workhouse Hill, came round the corner of the kiosk just then. Jane and he knew each other to say "Hullo" to. He said: "You let that kid alone!"

It was two against two now, so Jane felt quite confident. But there was no more trouble. The women were almost upon them. The boy with the cigarette said: "Aw, we was only foolin'. Bloody little savage!" he remarked wholeheartedly, and one of the women passing by said clearly to her companion, with a look of distaste at Jane: "What a *rough* little girl to be fighting with boys!"

Jane picked up her parcel and Pompey's lead, said: "Thank you," to the Coyle boy and went on.

She and Pompey finished the ice-cream and fish and chips in bed, after which Pompey curled up at the foot of the bed and croakingly purred himself to sleep. Jane lay awake for a long while, thinking again. She was still thinking when she fell asleep.

She woke suddenly and heard the front door closing. She heard a giggle in the hall and Margaret's whisper. Another voice whispered in reply. Margaret giggled again and there was the sound of a squeal and a slap and Margaret's voice, louder. The other voice answered. Jane knew it now. It belonged to the man on the sand-hills. Steps came cautiously along the hall, the door of Margaret's room opened and clicked shut. Jane lay rigid. She heard a last outburst of giggling, smothered immediately, then all was quiet except for a faint creaking of bed-springs.

Jane stayed only five more minutes, thinking. Then she got out of bed, dressed and, moving noiselessly, packed her hiker's satchel with clothes, tooth-brush, comb, and her savings pig, which felt good and heavy. She put on a warm coat, slung her satchel on her back, wrapped Pompey in a blanket—praying to God, if He were there, not to let Pompey speak, which, if He was, He didn't—eased up the window

and climbed out and away from the Cottage and Margaret and the damp-faced man.

There was only one refuge in all the world. She went to it through the darkness—it was past one o'clock in the morning and the street lights were out and no one went by—hugging Pompey close. He felt nice and soft. He was having a tiresome, bewildering time, but he was being most sensible. Workhouse Hill seemed extra long and steep. When she came into the courtyard, the Workhouse was dark as everything else, but that didn't matter. There was only a short while to wait until daylight. She was here, and that was all that mattered.

By the last glow of the crooked moon, she went softly along until she found a broken window, where she and Pompey could get in. She hoped there would be no bats in the room; she could see none, and, anyway, they would surely be frightened off by Pompey. She settled Pompey and herself in the blanket on the flagged floor. She didn't think she could sleep, but she did sleep.

It was Richard Burke who woke her, gaping in the window and asking what in the name of all that was holy was she doing there.

Jane sat up. Pompey was up already, prowling around the room and muttering as if he didn't think much of it. It was certainly an unattractive room, dirty and thick with cobwebs. Jane was glad she hadn't been able to see it until now. She said: "Good-morning," to Richard, and explained that she had arrived so late last night that she had thought it better to stay here and not disturb the Graces.

"Holy God!" said Richard. He scowled at her and Pompey. Then his mouth and his eyes opened wide and he scowled at the satchel. "Running away, is it? I declare to my God I don't know what's getting into young people nowadays."

"I'm not running *away*. You couldn't," said Jane, pointing out the obvious, for Richard was still scowling, "run far with a cat. I just ran here."

"You're coming straight to Peter and Paul with me now, anyway, young woman!"

"Of course," said Jane, "but I must comb my hair first, Richard."

Naturally Peter and Paul were surprised to see her and Pompey, but they understood immediately that a person wouldn't care to stay in a house with Margaret's friend.

"He *did* mean to be kind, but he looked an untrustworthy sort of man, somehow. Perhaps," admitted Jane, "it was rather childish of me, but I didn't like having him so near all night." She paused. "It *was* childish, because I wouldn't see him at all—he'd be altogether taken up with Margaret—but I hated to know he was there."

"It wasn't childish," Peter said. She looked grim, but she was putting honey on toast for Jane in a very welcoming way.

"That girl!" said Paul, and rolled up her eyes and pressed her lips together. She was cutting up a crisp rasher of bacon for Pompey.

Plainly, they were both extremely angry with Margaret. Being nuns, they mightn't understand properly about the facts of life. Jane herself felt Margaret had been at fault, but it wasn't fair to have her blamed for the wrong reasons.

"Margaret was only following her natural instincts. I think she shouldn't have followed them in the Cottage—only in her free time—but maybe she didn't realise that. She's not an intelligent girl." Peter and Paul were silent. "Also I mightn't have minded so much about last night except for Meath. You see, I'd been thinking of Meath all day, so it was one thing on top of another. No one's brain," said Jane, apologetically, "is very clear at night, somehow."

"Yours was clear," said Peter, "and you acted sensibly."

"Well, of course, I knew it would be all right for me to come here."

"We love having you." Quickly Paul added: "And Pompey."

She was an exceedingly courteous nun.

"I love being here, too. I was panic-stricken last night, but I'm adjusted again now, and I must go back. Margaret is probably very worried about me, if she's up."

"We," said Peter, looking grimmer than ever, "will go now and tell Margaret where you are."

Jane sighed contentedly.

"Then I can stay a little longer. That's fine."

"You will stay with us," said Peter, "until your parents return on Monday."

Jane stared at them. Then, suddenly, she started to cry. It was most shameful and ridiculous, but she couldn't stop. Peter and Paul patted her and made clucking noises and Pompey walked around her feet and waved his tail agitatedly, and still Jane couldn't stop crying.

Chapter Twelve

"Some of them Gas Lane crowd," said Mickey, "was bothering that Joyce kid last night. She put the run on 'em, though. Like this." He feinted with his right and led with his left. "She's a great little kid." He sighed. "If I was a bit bigger, I wouldn't mind taking a few boxing lessons at the Boys' Club. I was always kinda keen on it."

"You're big enough as you are," said his mother, who, after sixteen years of marriage to the Goddey, had a preference for small, manageable men. "And, anyway, isn't there paper-weights, or something?"

"Fly-weights, Mam."

They smiled companionably at each other over their elevenses. The sun shone in through the Glebe kitchen window and all the bright surfaces in the kitchen shone back. Everything in every room of the Glebe that could shine, shone; it was being kept in perfect order for Mr. Hailsham while Miss Byrne was in the Sancta Maria. Mrs. Coyle and Mickey worked happily and conscientiously during the day and at night, Mickey, proud guardian of the big house, slept in a room over the hall while his mother returned dutifully to her marital bed.

"That'll be Mr. Hailsham," said Mrs. Coyle, as the indicator on the wall sounded. "He always gives two rings. Let him in, Mickey, and I'll be wetting a fresh pot of tea for him."

It was the Goddey who had given the two rings. He came slouching aggressively into the kitchen in front of Mickey, stood and looked about him, and sneered.

"Thought it was high time for me to see for meself how the pair o' yez was fixed here." With exquisite sarcasm, he

remarked: "I hope I'm not intruding. No one would never dream of *inviting* me to come, o' course, though it might be natural for a man to want to know how his family was faring."

"I didn't think you'd be bothered coming as far as the Glebe." His wife managed a weak smile. "But it's nice to see you, Tom. There's a cup of tea just made."

The Goddey twisted his mouth at the remains of the elevenses on the table.

"Fine for you that you're able to sit on your backsides all day and guzzle!" It seemed unreasonable of him to jibe at these easy conditions of employment, since he himself, with no effort at all, benefited most from them financially. "Is there nothing stronger than tea in the house?"

"No," Mickey said.

"I wasn't asking you, me bucko."

His wife said, timidly: "There's nothing else. I could fry a few eggs for you, Tom."

The Goddey told her what she could do with the eggs and then, apparently abandoning hope of refreshment, said that it was a fine house, all right, and what the hell could one old woman want with a place that size?

"Irishmen without a decent roof over their heads and the English allowed to lord it over here yet, buyin' up half the country! 'Twasn't for this," said the Goddey, passionately, "we died in 1916! Have you e'er a few shillings on you, Katie? *I'm* not living in the lap o' luxury on free food, ye know."

"I've a half-crown left, Tom." As the Goddey's brow darkened at the coin she offered him, she added, hurriedly: "We'll be getting our wages tomorrow."

The Goddey pocketed the half-crown with an air of revulsion.

"You're the worst manager I ever seen. There's women," said the Goddey, sorrowfully, "could do wonders on the quarter of what you earn. Well, I'd better be leaving you to

get on with your bit of nourishment." He nodded casually and turned to the door. "As I'm here at all, I might as well take a look around."

A quick anguished glance passed between Mickey and his mother. Then, in wordless agreement, together they accompanied the Goddey on his tour of inspection.

As all three went from room to room, the Goddey fell into one of his rare amiable moods. He made sly jokes about the coloured sheets on a bed, until Mrs. Coyle blushed a little and even smiled and was, for a moment, something of the girl she had been before coming under the Goddey's manly influence. In the dining-room, a nude marble figurine amongst the ornaments on the mantelpiece evoked further Rabelaisian wit and he bounced up and down on one of the drawing-room chairs and then caught Mrs. Coyle on his knee and bounced up and down again. "Ride a cock horse," sang the Goddey, in his rich baritone, "to Banbury Cross!"

All the time, Mickey watched him.

Taking his leave, the Goddey was more amiable than ever. He stood at the front door and told Mickey that, for such a little runt, he wasn't making a bad fist of the place at all. He pinched his wife and said she was filling out and that he liked a woman with a bit of condition on. Then he waved to wife and son and, humming, strode off down the avenue.

Mrs. Coyle waited alone on the steps looking after him. At last she uttered one wistful sigh and turned to enter the hall. She stopped suddenly as Mickey came towards her from the dining-room. His tanned face was faded to an ugly yellow; the freckles stood out across the bridge of his nose. He said: "You know that box on the dining-room mantelpiece where she kep' the sovereign an' the half-sovereign an' the crown piece?"

"Her lucky coins!" Mrs. Coyle's face was chalk-white. "In the Dresden trinket box?"

Urgently, pleadingly, hopelessly, Mickey said: "Did you

put 'em away, Mammy? Away for safety, like?"

"No," Mrs. Coyle whispered. "No."

"They're gone, Mammy."

"Me grandmother," said the Goddey, impressively laying a sovereign, a half-sovereign and a crown on the counter, "didn't believe in banks." In red jersey and navy trousers, hair and teeth shining, he looked a very splendid ruffian in the smoky light of the crowded bar. "Like a sensible woman, she hid her savings in an old stocking under the settle bed." Courteously he addressed Mr. Simpson, the only foreigner present. "It could be that you wouldn't be knowing what a settle bed was?"

"I've seen illustrations."

"Ah," said the Goddey, disappointedly. Recovering his spirits, he tapped Mr. Simpson on the chest. "You'd travel far before you'd lay eyes on one nowadays."

Mr. Simpson said, politely: "I'm sure I should."

He moved away from the Goddey. His trade had left him with a wearied distaste of splendid ruffians. On the whole, the more splendid, the less productive.

"What about your grandmother's?" inquired George Pepper.

"Gone with the old days," said the Goddey, mournfully, "same as all the good things is gone. No more regard for solid stuff. They'd sooner have painted plywood with a bit o' chicken wire slung between." From the outskirts of the crowd came an ambiguous murmur that, faith! there was as much hard work done on the new beds as on the old. The Goddey frowned in scandalised chivalrous warning towards Miss Prescott behind the counter, but as she continued to pour a glass of stout in an unperturbed manner, he refrained from further reproof. "Well, as I was saying, many a time she'd pull out the old stocking and show it to me."

"Wasn't she afraid?" asked George.

"Afraid?" said the Goddey, puzzled. "How d'ye mean?"

"Just afraid," said George, who was feeling braver and braver these days.

The Goddey scowled. The Pepper chap was small and easy and for a moment the Goddey's fingers tingled, but the night was too young for that sort of amusement. He turned his back on George.

" 'When I'm gone, Tom,' she say'd, 'this'll all be yours.' " The Goddey paused. "God rest her soul," he said, reverently, "it was."

Miss Prescott regarded the coins doubtfully.

"I don't know about these. I've seen a five-shilling piece before but not the others."

"God help us, girl! You've heard of 'em, haven't you?"

Miss Prescott said, cautiously: "I've *heard* of them."

"I'm not quite sure," said an officious customer, "if they're legal tender at all." He was bigger than George, but not much. The Goddey's fists clenched. Miss Prescott, an excellent barmaid, said hurriedly: "I'll call the boss."

Mr. Hennessy, summoned from the kitchen, listened in silence to the tale of the devoted grandmother and her stocking. At the end of it he said, expressionlessly, that to his recollection, old Mrs. Coyle was dead this thirty years or more. It must, he said, have been a big stocking.

"Big," said the Goddey, "and full." He shook his head over the pretty coins. "I'm down to the toe of it."

Mr. Hennessy said: "H'm!"

"They're worth more than their face value, of course," said the officious customer, who seemed one destined for trouble as the sparks fly upwards. However, on this occasion, though Mr. Hennessy looked unfriendly, the Goddey beamed.

"That's right. But Mr. Hennessy'll do fair by me."

Mr. Hennessy was regarding the coins with ever greater abhorrence.

"I don't want to have anything to do with them at all."

"That's a queer thing, now." The Goddey's voice was soft. "You're not suggesting, be any chance, that my money isn't as good as another's?"

Mr. Hennessy had no doubt of the money's worth, only of its ownership. But as the Goddey leaned on the counter and smiled mirthlessly and absent-mindedly began to roll up one sleeve of the red jersey, he compromised.

"I'll give you thirty bob for the half-sovereign and you can keep the rest." He appealed to the company in general. "You all heard what he said about his grandmother, didn't you?"

"Dear old soul!" said George, fondly. "Here's to her!"

The Goddey was too busy taking his thirty shillings and ordering a drink to spare George more than one brief, threatening glance. George answered it by raising his glass on high. Beside him Mr. Simpson asked, interestedly: "Are you really anxious to have your neck broken?"

"At the moment, certainly not. I'm on top of the world. Maybe," George admitted, "slightly too much on top." He paused and frowned. "Except as an author, of course. Tell me, *was* my book as bad as you thought or *was* it partly your liver? Surely no book could be so bad. It *must* have been partly liver."

"All book. It stank."

George nodded.

"Then, plainly, the novel is not my forte."

"What I'm wondering," said Mr. Simpson, candidly, "is what is?"

"Once I'm in New York, I'll have plenty of scope to show you. I imagine," said George, encouragingly, "that I'll make an excellent publisher's reader. I may not be able to see the faults in my own work but I'll be down like a flash on the other fellow's. You'll find me a great asset in the office. Everyone will."

Awed, Mr. Simpson said: "Sometimes I feel I might as well

put a leprechaun on the pay-roll."

"What better, with his crock of gold? I told Girlie the good news last night. She was so happy that she cried. I haven't told my future father-in-law yet. He won't be so happy. But I'll make it merciful and quick." George struck an attitude. In a resonant voice, he said: "Mr. Dillon! I have secured a lucrative position in a New York publishing firm. I am leaving next week for the land of the free and taking your daughter with me."

"Very nice," said Mr. Simpson, "but what makes you think he'll let her go?"

George smiled.

"She'll be coming. I have a card up my sleeve. Got it yesterday. Several of 'em, in fact." He laid a finger to his lips with a conspiratorial air. "Hush! I'm saying no more at present."

Mr. Simpson shuddered away from him.

"I guess I've paid my debt to the Workhouse Graces in full. I'll get drunk quickly and try to forget you."

Swaying above them, the Goddey said, genially, that anyone might want to forget young Pepper. He admitted his pronounced dislike of young Pepper's face. He invited young Pepper to take it outside and have it beaten off him.

"I'm taking it home," said George and took it so quickly that the Goddey was left blinking and peering through the smoke for several moments before realising it was gone. Rallying from his first sense of loss, he attached himself affectionately to the decent Yank who knew the Pepper bastard for what he was and offered to sing one of the real old Irish songs for the sound man. Holding Mr. Simpson firmly by the arm, he started immediately on a long ballad about shooting a landlord and followed it with a shorter one about shooting a policeman. In the interval while he refreshed his parched throat with the drink Mr. Simpson appreciatively provided, another singer threw back his head, wrinkled his face into

a fixed stare of intolerable anguish and howled a plea to cruel Molly Asthore. When this ditty finished, the Goddey was ready again with another.

And so, for Mr. Simpson, the long night wore on. He remained in this simple Irish environment to the end; he wished to take his fill of it, since he so soon must leave the shores of the Motherland. It was his considered opinion that one should experience fully all one could; with so much, once was enough, which made, Mr. Simpson believed, in a general way for contentment.

At two o'clock in the morning, even the Goddey's powerful vocal cords were weary. He led a final chorus of 'God Save Ireland' and shambled off into the darkness.

Hearing the click of the gate latch, Mrs. Coyle and Mickey stiffened. They listened intently to the footsteps coming up the path to the cottage.

"Mickey! He's staggerin' drunk!"

Mickey said, levelly: "What else did you expect? He had plenty to get drunk with." In the firelight, he looked set and old.

The Goddey flung open the door and surveyed his waiting family in truculent surprise.

"'Tisn't often ye do me the great honour of sittin' up for me." He banged the door behind him. "And thanks be to God for that! Ye haven't the kind of visages any man would be glad to see at home afore him." He dropped heavily into a chair, belched and spat. "Get me a bite of food, Katie." Mrs. Coyle stood, staring at him. "And be quick about it, you!"

"Yes, Tom," said his wife, faintly, cast one pleading, frightened glance at Mickey and moved to obey.

Mickey said: "Pa!"

"Huh? What're you doin' here? Thought you was supposed to be above guardin' the Glebe." The Goddey doubled

up with laughter. "A great guardian you'd make, wouldn't you? God help us, there's not enough of you in it to mind a mousehole. A fine son for a man to have!" Suddenly the Goddey's hilarity left him. He studied Mickey with disgust. "Sure enough, there's no trace of me in you in the living world. Maybe I've been made a right innocent gom of all these years, lettin' meself be saddled with someone else's get."

A quiver went through Mrs. Coyle, cutting bread at the dresser, but she kept her back turned to her husband. A quiver went through Mickey, too, but he faced his father.

"That's no way to speak in front of Mammy."

The Goddey's mirth returned in full, roaring force.

"So you're learning me manners now, are ye? By cripes, Katie, d'ye hear the bloody little maneen!"

"Pa! Give me back——"

From the dresser, Mrs. Coyle moaned: "Oh, no, Mickey! Wait till after."

"Give me back the money you took from the Glebe, Pa!" The Goddey stared in open-mouthed amazement. "'Tis your own business what you do any place else, but me an' Mam is caring the Glebe and it's not fair to be getting us a bad name there." Mickey's voice shook. "Please, Pa!"

"—— you!" said the Goddey and knocked him down. Next moment, his wife was clinging to him. Impartially, he repeated: "—— you!" and knocked her down, too. She was up immediately, holding him and begging him not to hurt Mickey. The Goddey hit her again. "You bitch, bringing up a boy to insult his own father!" He paid no more heed to Mickey's futile blows on his back than to shake him off as a bull might shake off a terrier. "I'll attend to you later, me bucko!"

Meanwhile he bent his energies on attending to his wife. He had self-denyingly kept his hands off too many in Hennessy's pub not to revel now in letting them have their full freedom. He was enjoying a glorious release of inhibi-

tion when Mrs. Coyle screamed a warning to him, and Mickey, standing on a chair behind his father, brought the poker down on his head.

The Goddey dropped to the floor.

Two hours later the Goddey, still unconscious, was on his way to hospital, Mrs. Coyle was being treated for hysterics, the police were in the cottage at the foot of Workhouse Hill and Mickey was entering the Workhouse through the same window that Jane had used the previous night.

Softly he came out from the cobwebbed room and went on down the flagged passage. In the cold light of dawn, the walls wept greenly and the flags oozed moisture, and spiders' skeins waved black and clinging in uneven flurries of draught. He crept on noiselessly, going always farther away from the Graces' quarters, stopping only once to listen to the dreamy rumble of Richard's snoring coming from behind a closed door and then hurrying on more confidently. He looked in every room now and at last, coming to one at the end of all the many passages, a dank little cell, cluttered with twisted, mouldering hunks of metal, with only the space of a man's hand between the small window and the towering courtyard wall outside, he went in and shut the door and barricaded it with a rusty boiler which, in years gone by, had simmered many tons of maize and oaten porridge for paupers' sustenance. Then he cleared a space for himself in a corner between the remains of a vast stove and a tangle of copper piping and huddled there to wait for the sheltering night.

It was late afternoon when Jane came whispering and pushing and cautiously knocking at the door. By the time Mickey let her in, she was very angry.

"You're a most stupid boy! You kept me standing there in the corridor though I told you at the beginning it was only me bringing succour. If I'd been seen, I'd have been a

dangerous clue. Do you *want* to be captured?"

Mickey looked away from her.

"Is he dead?"

"They're not sure whether he'll live or die. I don't think anybody minds very much, really, but, of course, the law must be observed and they're searching for you everywhere." Jane put down the satchel she carried and glanced approvingly around the little room. "This is a fine, safe place. It's the one I'd have picked myself. I went all over the Workhouse yesterday inspecting it completely, which I never had a chance to do before and when this door wouldn't open today, I knew at once you were inside." She sat down on the floor. "With all this jagged, rusty stuff about there's a slight risk of blood-poisoning but I dare say you're being careful."

Mickey's haggard face twisted in a wry grin.

"It's hardly worth while fussing about blood-poisoning. If you could guess I was here, I suppose everyone can."

"Not at all." Jane began to unpack her satchel. "To me, it was obvious you were in the Workhouse, because it was where I came myself when I was rather distressed." She hesitated. "Petei and Paul *may* have an inkling. They're very astute." She hesitated again. "Actually, the Guards came looking for you here a few hours ago, but Peter and Paul said there was no trace of you around, so they went away again. They didn't insist on searching; one can't be so insulting and irreligious as not to take a nun's word. And, of course, Mickey, there *is* no trace of you around—except here." She looked at him sternly. "Peter and Paul wouldn't tell a lie in any circumstances, you understand. What they did, if they did anything, was a thing called sophistry." She frowned considerably at the cheese sandwiches and flask of tea on the floor. "When I said I'd like to take some food and explore and could I leave Pompey with Borgia, they refrained completely from comment. And Borgia made a lot of sandwiches, all extremely thick, even though I'd had a big dinner.

I rather think they did commit sophistry. A perfectly moral thing," said Jane, judicially, "though clever. Aren't you hungry, Mickey?"

"I'm almost past it," said Mickey, with a groan, and grabbed a sandwich.

Passing him a mug of tea, Jane said, reprovingly: "It was foolish to run away without provisioning yourself. Have you money for running with?" Mickey, his mouth full, shook his head. "I thought you mightn't. I brought my savings pig." She took the plaster animal from her satchel and regarded him mournfully. "He has to be broken to get the money. That's why he's so good for his purpose." Knowing exactly how Abraham felt, she reached for an iron bar.

Mickey said, roughly: "You can keep your money. I'll manage all right."

The sacrificial bar poised, Jane asked: "How?"

"I'm aiming to get to Rosslare when it's dark and slip on the boat."

"England?"

"That's it. Once I'm there, I'll be O.K."

"You'd have to slip on on this side and off on the other. A ticket would be far simpler," said Jane and closed her eyes and smashed her pig. She opened them and was comforted to see that the result looked satisfactory. "Count it."

The pig had saved four pounds, six and eightpence. Ungraciously, Mickey muttered: "Likely they'll be waiting at the boat for me, anyway."

"You're extraordinarily spiritless. I find it disappointing because what you did was quite brave and unusual. A sort of Playboy of the Western World thing. He used a loy, of course. I don't know exactly what that is. Do you?"

Mickey said, sullenly: "No."

"Being an agricultural worker, I thought you might. But a poker," said Jane, kindly, "is just as good, I'm sure." She filled his mug again. "You mustn't lose heart. So far, your

escape has gone splendidly. Nobody really *knows* your whereabouts but me. Naturally, I'd never inform on you, but if you had any doubts you could kill me and hide me in the boiler." She corrected herself. "Oh, no, I suppose you couldn't. You're not the murderous type—just the manslaughtering."

"I wish to Christ," said Mickey, "you'd clear off to hell and stop bothering me!"

"I will when you've finished your meal. I must bring back the flask and mug to Borgia. I understand how you feel. It's tension. But even if they *do* catch you—and the worst," said Jane, delicately, "comes to the worst for your father—they won't hang you." She studied him. "You're probably too young even to send to prison."

Mickey set his teeth.

"I'll hang myself sooner than let them put me in one of their bloody reformatories. And I won't be dragged before their bloody courts and have 'em make a show of me and Mammy before the whole world with their prying and bullying. In the newspapers an' all!" He rubbed his sleeve across his mouth. "Did you hear anything about how Mam was?"

"I believe she's suffering from some natural agitation, but no more." Jane sat down on the floor and clasped her hands on her knees. "Oh, Mickey, they're sending me to a school, too. A dreadful one. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could run away together?"

Mickey kicked the pig's tail across the floor.

"You've no more sense than a child of three. Anyone could know you'll go blabbing your head off about me as soon as you get out of here. I wish to God," he said, darkly, "*I could* put you in the boiler."

"It's tension, Mickey. I *never* blab. Since yesterday," said Jane, earnestly, "I've been thinking it doesn't pay to be too sensible. It wasn't awfully sensible of me to come here in the

night, I suppose, but now here I am, loving it. But if I don't do anything else unsensible, I'll be sent off to that school." Suddenly, Jane sat up straight. "Mickey, we could get married."

"God Almighty!" said Mickey, despairingly.

"Females of twelve and males of fourteen can legally marry. You're over fourteen, aren't you, Mickey?" Mickey was beyond speech. "Then I wouldn't be sent to that school or you to a reformatory because there's something about not separating husbands and wives. I think it's in the Constitution." Jane began to droop. "But I suppose we'd find it excessively hard to get anyone to marry us."

"I'd as soon go to a reformatory. And that's not tension," said Mickey, ungallantly.

Deep in thought, Jane shook her head for silence.

"Mickey, if we said we were going to have a baby, they wouldn't want to stop us marrying. They'd be trying to hurry us up."

"In the name of God," said Mickey, shocked, "how could we have a baby?"

"Don't you know?" Jane was surprised at this ignorance. "I have booklets at home explaining how to do it. I'll get them for you."

Utterly scandalised, Mickey said, severely: "I wouldn't expect to hear that kind of talk even from tinkers itself."

Jane gave a very weary sigh.

"I seem to talk wrongly everywhere. Except with Peter and Paul. I don't have to be careful with them. It's most soothing." She put the flask and mug in her satchel and stood up. "I meant we'd pretend we're having one, of course. Actually, I'm not physiologically equipped to have one yet, but they couldn't be absolutely sure of that, I *think*. Throw the bits of pig into the boiler—they're clues." She took a few slow steps towards the door and stopped. "Mickey, if I were you, I'd tell Peter and Paul. They'd help you." He was looking

at her as he must have looked when using the poker. "Mickey, if I were you, I would."

"Get out!" said Mickey, and pushed her.

Letting herself be pushed outside, Jane said, bracingly: "Good luck!"

"I'll need it." Through the closing door, he said, gruffly: "Sorry about the pig."

Jane walked back along the passage, her head down, thinking. Turning the first corner, she banged into Peter and let the satchel fall. Peter picked it up.

"So you ate all the sandwiches?"

"The sandwiches," said Jane, committing sophistry, "are eaten. I hope I didn't hurt you. I didn't expect you to be there."

Peter cleared her throat.

"On wet days, Paul and I sometimes walk up and down the passages for exercise."

"I see." They looked at each other steadily. "This is a fine day."

Peter said: "It is." A cobweb dangled between them from the ceiling like an evil veil. She brushed it aside. "If a person is in trouble, Jane, it's far better to come out and face it and get it over."

"I'd do it that way. But people are different. Some people would rather kill themselves. It's not the punishment that worries them but the publicity for other people. It's no use advising them," said Jane, sadly, "because that's how they feel and nothing will change them. All that can be done is to help them, because they need that badly."

Peter asked abruptly: "Is it the old lumber room?" Jane was silent. "Very well, Jane. And now," said Peter, suddenly, to Jane's great relief, abandoning all sophistry. "I'll have a word with Master Mickey."

Chapter Thirteen

As Mr. Simpson had never seen an Irish round tower, Peter and Paul had decided some days previously that their final outing together would be to Ardmore, where he could view the particularly fine specimen there.

Mr. Simpson had small interest in towers of any shape, but he always contentedly brought the Workhouse Graces wherever they directed, not caring what he saw as long as he was seeing it with them. They had the agreeable trait of making him pleased with himself; he hoped the sensation would last for a while when he got home. If it sometimes took a little extra effort to live up to their conception of him, that was all to the good, being morally bracing. It was plain that Paul innocently considered publishers as omniscient beings existing on a rarefied mental plane; though doing her gentle best at dissimulation, she tended to be disappointed and grieved at any gaps in Mr. Simpson's knowledge and consequently he had, in preparation for this last day which he wished to be flawless, studied a dull, but mercifully short, book on archæology. Living up to Peter was less troublesome; she respected him as an honest, though prospering, business-man, which, on the whole, he was.

When he drove into the courtyard on Saturday afternoon, Peter and Paul and Tim were waiting for him. All three seemed subdued. Peter and Paul greeted him absently and took their places in the back seat of the car. Tim lay down on the front seat and went to sleep. Even when the foolish Labrador in Main Street chased the car, barking, Tim did not bother to sit up and growl contempt, as always, but merely growled quietly in his slumber.

"Isn't he well?" asked Mr. Simpson, looking at him and hoping he wouldn't be actively unwell before Ardmore was reached.

"Tired," said Paul. She hesitated. "He had a fight."

"The Joyce cat," said Peter, "is staying with us at present. They don't get on."

Paul sighed.

"I'm afraid Tim knows he's lost face."

Peter gave a grim chuckle.

"He's lucky he didn't lose more of it."

There was silence after that. Mr. Simpson thought of a bright remark and made it and Peter and Paul laughed dutifully but then there was silence again. Even when Tim recovered from his shameful experience, became alert and watched the countryside closely and snarled briefly at each passing dog, there was very little conversation in the car. Mr. Simpson, striving all the time to do his cheerful best, was touched; it was obvious now that the sadness of this drive derived wholly from its being their last with him. A trifle sad, too, he was also, naturally, more pleased with himself than ever.

The round tower was looked at quickly. Mr. Simpson said his archaeological piece very nicely but, disappointingly, Paul did not give it all the attention it surely merited and Peter gave it none at all. She seemed oddly impatient. When Mr. Simpson, continuing to do his best, eruditely mentioned the near-by St. Declan's well, Peter said she thought they'd better be going home.

"You may need to make arrangements." With sudden interest, she put her head on one side and studied the tower. "For your journey on Monday."

"I've made them," said Mr. Simpson, puzzled.

"You may need," said Paul, nervously, "to make other arrangements."

Mr. Simpson stared at them. They stared back. Then

Peter turned and stamped towards a mossy bank.

"The first time we met you, you told us that if ever we wanted something from you, we were to let you know. We want something now."

Mr. Simpson sat on the mossy bank with a Workhouse Grace like a crow, one plump, one thin, on either side. While he listened to them, the blue sea froze into a block of ice, the thorns of the pretty dog-roses crept out slyly through their leaves and pierced his ankles and the crows became vultures. Appalled, he glanced from one to the other Grace. They looked horribly calm; they looked insanely calm. Desperately, he tried to bring them to their senses.

"But, Sisters, you can't do this. You can't conceal a criminal."

Peter said, placidly, that they were doing it. Paul said that Mickey Coyle wasn't a criminal but he might become one if people got hold of him and started shutting him up or even annoying him in any way. They were sure of this now, having spent hours talking with Mickey. In America, she said happily, he should turn out a very fine boy.

"And what," asked Mr. Simpson, wildy, "gives you the idea *I* can manage to get him there?" Realising his mistake, he added, hastily: "Even if I were willing to be an accessory after the fact. Because, bluntly, that's what I'd be. That's what you *are*."

The accessories were unperturbed. They said he was a very clever man; they knew he'd find a way of saving Mickey. Probably, said Peter, engrossed in the tower again, it would be necessary to cancel the flight from Shannon on Monday, because Mickey would need passports and visas and all that sort of thing, but if he were brought to England first, everything could be got from there and then he and Mr. Simpson could set off peacefully for New York together.

Feeling now like a fly between spiders, Mr. Simpson, still struggling gamely, inquired pertinently what the police

would be doing in the meantime. Peter said they wouldn't be doing much; it was known today that the Goddey would live and the Superintendent of the Guards was a good friend of theirs. They had, she said, with a touch of complacency, cured his youngest daughter's warts. Paul said that taking Micky away would be child's play to a man who had been through the war. Mr. Simpson laughed harshly. Paul opened her eyes wide and said that a person used to dealing with Japanese soldiers would hardly worry about Irish policemen. Mr. Simpson said, nastily, that that was legal killing. Paul rolled her eyes.

"Haven't you ever done anything illegal in your life? It seems so difficult not to. I don't mean *wrong*," she explained, carefully, "just illegal."

"Nothing much worse than a tail-light," said Mr. Simpson, unhelpfully.

They went to work on him then, but he was beaten even before they began. When Tim returned panting from a frenzied hunting of invisible prey, Mr. Simpson had agreed to smuggle Mickey Coyle to Dublin on Monday, to fly with him to London and, as quickly as could be arranged, to New York. During all this discussion, Mr. Simpson often laughed harshly.

"And what do I do with him then?"

"Get him a job," said Peter, practically.

"Night school." Paul sounded dreamy. "Who knows what Mickey may become?"

"Or young Pepper, for that matter. New York," remarked Mr. Simpson, with a sarcasm he knew to be futile, "will be a regular home from home for Ballykeen."

Paul said, devoutly. "It was God sent you to us."

Mr. Simpson laughed harshly.

Hour by hour for three days, Melly was rapidly approaching the moment when she must stand up and scream until

she was taken away and put where the noise wouldn't bother people. It was a toss up whether the scream would be evoked by Dr. Jim, Mrs. Finnegan or Rodney.

Each morning she thought she could never last unshrieking with Dr. Jim throughout the working day. Each evening she left him at six o'clock having managed it again.

Each evening, at quarter past six, Mrs. Finnegan was an additional test of her self-control. Mrs. Finnegan was being arch these times. At length and incessantly, she expressed her satisfaction at seeing Miss Brown with a nice friend of her own at last.

"Look at the way," said Mrs. Finnegan, "he'll come into my kitchen and sit chatting there waiting for you, simple as you please!"

"Aha!" Mrs. Finnegan would say, "if you're asking *me*, Miss Brown, I'll be losing you soon and sorry and all as I'll be for a pleasanter lady never entered the house, still, it's only to be expected."

"Aha!" Mrs. Finnegan would say again, winking (speaking to Melly now she often gave the impression of being afflicted with a nervous tic), "it pays not to be in too much of a hurry because Mr. Right always turns up in the end."

Sometime later each evening, Rodney would come strolling along, once more setting Melly's heart singing contentedly as a kettle on the hob before she remembered she must brace herself to endure, in dread and silence and secrecy, any mention of Bessie's name.

On every one of these three days, Melly made several watchful journeys past the Sancta Maria. Always the hall door was shut. But at last, this Saturday afternoon, a man and woman let themselves out as she went by. Melly ran up the steps before they closed the door and, by great good luck, got unseen to the room with its warning notice: NO VISITORS.

Bessie was lying still and flat and seemed asleep, but her

eyes opened as Melly dropped to her knees by the bed and felt for her pulse. Drowsily, Bessie murmured: "Hallo, ducks."

"Ssh!" Melly put her mouth close to Bessie's ear. "I shouldn't be here at all. I slipped in without telling anyone. You're not supposed to have visitors."

"Bad girl!" said Bessie, weakly. "Wait until Mrs. Magee catches you!"

"How are you?"

"They call me Mimi!" Bessie gave the ghost of a guffaw. She blinked at Melly. "Tell Rodney I'm leaving him a cool thirty thou. That'll make him laugh. Mr. Higgins is coming tonight."

"*Mr. Higgins!*" Bessie blinked at her again. Melly whispered savagely: "For God's sake, keep awake!"

"That's all very well," said Bessie, suddenly becoming roused at this injustice, "but they're sticking needles into me all today to stop me."

"Listen, Bessie! I shouldn't be saying this but would you like to come home? You could rest in the Glebe." Urgently, Melly hissed: "Will I get Rodney to bring you home?"

"Poor Rodney!" Bessie fell into a light doze. Melly shook her out of it. "Says his digestion's ruined."

Melly stood up and glowered down sullenly.

"I'm going now. I'll be back with Rodney."

Bessie blinked again and feebly waggled the fingers of one hand.

"Been nice seeing you, Lady Macbeth!"

Gratefully, triumphantly, cheerfully, Peter and Paul waved off Mr. Simpson and his car from the Workhouse until eight o'clock on Monday morning. They were turning to each other in mute congratulation when Tim sprang between them, loudly barking, and galloped towards the farthest end of the courtyard. Round the corner of the

building came Mr. Higgins. "Good fellow!" he said, and dropped his hand negligently to the leaping watchdog. Tim fawned on it immediately. Still fawning, he escorted Mr. Higgins to the Graces and, thumping his tail violently on the ground, rested content at the feet of this wonderful man.

"Good evening, Sisters." Mr. Higgins smiled pleasantly. "A friendly little dog."

With a trace of astonishment, Paul said: "They say dogs *know!*"

"They say a lot of foolish things. I must apologise for wandering around without your permission. My name is——"

Peter said, abruptly: "We know you by sight, Mr. Higgins."

"We know nearly everyone in town," said Paul, staring in disillusionment at Tim's tail.

"And everyone," said Mr. Higgins, gracefully, "knows the Workhouse Sisters." He made a slight, admiring bow. "A sure help in stress and storm."

"You're not, I hope," said Peter, looking singularly unhelpful, "in either?"

"At the moment, fortunately, no." Airily, Mr. Higgins waved his hand at the Workhouse. "A fine building."

"We were told that you think so."

Mr. Higgins laughed and shook his head.

"You Sisters hear all the town gossip. But it really would be eminently suitable for a factory, don't you think?" He appealed to them with winning frankness. "And, of course, we'd get it dirt cheap."

Peter remained so stony that Paul said, weakly: "I suppose in business it's natural to get impatient with anyone who stands in your way. She paused and said, compassionately: "Business must be so difficult, Mr. Higgins, with all that trouble about not being able to serve God and Mammon."

"Every sensible Irish business man," said Mr. Higgins, "finds it excellent policy to serve both. If you come to think

of it, that's what we'll be doing here *in excelsis*, making statues for the good of others' souls and our pockets." Diffidently, he murmured: "We think of calling the company, Sanctas, Ltd.," and awaited their comments.

None came from Peter. Paul, always tender of anyone's feelings, was constrained to rush into the breach once more.

"It seems quite an appropriate title."

"I'm glad you approve," said Mr. Higgins, relieved. "I hope you will allow us to present Sister Peter and yourself with the first statue we turn out."

Paul, beginning to thank him, suddenly realised the significance of this generous offer and stopped, bewildered. She looked at Peter. Peter was looking at Mr. Higgins. He smiled at them. Paul, trembling, watched Peter, who continued to look silently at Mr. Higgins. Tim, who had let his tail rest for a while, looked at him too and wagged it again. Mr. Higgins himself looked away at the Workhouse.

"It really is a fine building. I inspected it carefully. I inspected it *very* carefully." He paused. In a light, level voice, he said: "In one place, I had rather a squeeze between the walls, but I managed it." He turned back to them with a winning smile. "The discomfort was well worth while."

Paul slowly closed her eyes against that smile and Tim's display of affection. Peter said brusquely to the loving dog: "Get up!" and prodded him with her boot. To Mr. Higgins she said: "Perhaps you'd tell us plainly whatever you want to say?"

Mr. Higgins suddenly became grave and considerate.

"It may come as a shock to you to discover that"—a shadow of the smile returned—"unknown to you, of course——"

"Need we bother with that sort of nonsense, Mr. Higgins?"

"No," said Mr. Higgins. "I'll save time. I saw Mickey Coyle. I wasn't surprised. I thought there was a good chance I'd find him here. He didn't, I must explain, see me. I should be on my way to the Guards barracks now."

"Well," said Peter, "aren't you?" And Paul moaned.

"I had another idea," said Mr. Higgins.

In the parlour, he expounded it succinctly. Tim, coldly banished, whined outside the door. Paul sat with the expression of one shadowed by the knacker's yard, her shaking hands clasped in her lap. Peter stayed motionless as any statue Mr. Higgins might propose to make. When he had finished, there was silence in the parlour. Then Peter stirred within her robes.

"I find it hard to understand you."

"I tried to put it as clearly as possible," said Mr. Higgins, apologetically.

"I mean I don't understand *you*. I understand well enough what you said. On condition that we leave the Workhouse, you won't inform on Mickey Coyle."

"Exactly, Sister."

"But——" Paul smote her clenched fists together. "It's——" She opened her eyes in astonishment and horror at Mr. Higgins and whispered: "Why, it's blackmail!"

Mr. Higgins agreed that you could call it that.

"Needs must, you know. I admit my hand is a lamentably weak one. No doubt you will both come to realise that it would be far better for the boy to be subjected to a little discipline. He certainly," said Mr. Higgins, thoughtfully, "seems to require a little discipline."

Paul was beginning: "Oh, no, no, it would be fatal to——" when Peter silenced her with a glance.

"If you brought the Guards here, Mr. Higgins, you wouldn't be very popular in the town."

"That's another weak point of mine," Mr. Higgins admitted. "I don't want to be any more unpopular than necessary." He paused. "I hope it won't be necessary." Peter gazed at him reflectively. Mr. Higgins did not flinch. "Possibly you wish to consult together. I can wait outside in the meantime."

Peter said, slowly: "You needn't."

Paul's face twitched in anguish. Brokenly, she said: "We must save Mickey." Ignoring Mr. Higgins, her sad eyes met Peter's. "That's all, isn't it, Peter?"

"That boy," said Peter angrily, "was always a nuisance, what with one thing or another."

Mr. Higgins looked at her inquiringly. Peter nodded. Mr. Higgins stood up.

"Dealing with such clear minds has been a most unusual experience for me. I would wish to be allowed the privilege of meeting you again some time, but I suppose that's hardly likely?"

"No," said Peter.

"I'll take it, then, that you'll tell Reverend Mother immediately that you are returning to the convent?"

"We'll tell her tomorrow."

"In the morning, please, before the boy can be smuggled off somewhere else."

Paul stared at him, appalled.

"Don't you trust our word?"

"I make it a rule to trust no one. It's been forced on me," said Mr. Higgins sadly, "by years of bitter experience. Good-bye, Sisters! If there were more people like you in the world, there would be no reason for so many like me."

He bowed and left them. They remained seated while he opened the door to the delighted watchdog, who pranced across the courtyard with him and only with reluctance parted with him at the gate.

"I always said," muttered Peter, viciously, "that that dog was a fool."

For the first time, Paul attempted no defence of Tim. She drew a deep breath and bent her head.

"If ever a man needed prayer, that man does, but, God forgive me! I'll find it very hard to pray for him."

There was a long silence. Paul raised her head. She was

gripping her beads. Peter was gripping hers. Both let the beads fall from their fingers in the same moment.

"We can't expect her to do any more for us, Peter."

"No."

"Peter, I can't believe this is the end."

"Paul, I think it is the end."

Miserably, they looked away from each other. Then, slyly, secretly, their fingers crept back to their beads.

Chapter Fourteen

Melly, in a running walk all the way from Bessie in the Sancta Maria, met Rodney at the gate of Ocean View. She said at once: "Please take me somewhere and give me a drink."

He brought her to the little public house at the corner of the road. While he drank half his glass of ale, she finished one gin and asked for another. He ordered it without comment. Melly started on it determinedly.

"You're very restful, Rodney."

"All things to all women."

"Even when they're trying to get drunk as quickly as possible?"

"I gathered that's what you're doing."

"Do you think if I switched to brandy it would help?"

"When you didn't begin on it, it might cause some turmoil."

Melly giggled.

"Then I'd lose everything and be right back where I started. Am I a little drunk already?"

"Slightly. How drunk do you want to be?"

"Enough to make me talk. Gin did it once before. Ask him to put less lime in this one. Rodney, you're wonderful, just sitting quietly and not asking me anything. Rodney, I've wanted to talk to you for days."

"But you've *been* talking to me for days, darling."

"Not saying anything, though. I felt so horrid and sly. Another gin and then everything will be all right, maybe. At least, it won't be all right, but I can tell you what I think is wrong, and you can put it right. And you mustn't imagine

I'm unbalanced. Though sometimes I wonder if I am—a little."

"Exquisitely balanced, drunk or sober, my sweet."

"I *do* like you, Rodney."

"I like you."

"Isn't it nice? I don't think I can finish this one. But I'm still finding it hard to talk. Perhaps if we went outside—the air helped last time. It acted as a sort of catalyst to the gin."

On the road, Melly swayed slightly. Rodney steadied her with his hand under her elbow. She leaned against him gratefully.

"Dear Rodney!"

"Dear Melly! Shall we walk towards Ocean View?"

"I can talk as we go."

"All you wish, darling."

Suddenly, Melly felt hopelessly sober. Everything and everyone, even for once, Rodney, looking staid and commonplace. It was an incongruous setting for melodrama. But she drew a deep, determined breath and prepared to speak. Immediately she snapped her teeth together again.

Strolling towards them from Workhouse Hill, stepping lightly on the balls of his feet and humming, came Mr. Higgins. He went by with a cheery wave of the hand. Melly turned her head slowly after him and watched him pass the street leading to his home and office in Strand Row, watched him turn the corner to Elm Road, said: "Wait for me at Ocean View, Rodney!" pushed him aside and followed Mr. Higgins.

In the house on Elm Road, the Venetian blinds were lowered as always on a Saturday to discourage any chance callers on Dr. Jim's half-day. Noiselessly, Melly let herself in with her latch-key. She stood for a moment in the hall. There was no sound from the kitchen. The doctor's devoted housekeeper would be enjoying her free afternoon on the promenade. Melly moved cautiously along the hall to the

dining-room. From within came a murmur of voices, a laugh, a clink of glasses.

Melly bent down and put her ear to the keyhole.

Twenty minutes later, she burst in on Rodney and George in the kitchen of Ocean View. She closed the door and leaned her back against it.

"Rodney! Oh, Rodney!"

George said, politely: "Won't you sit down?" and brought forward a chair. Melly gave a strangled laugh.

"*I am* a little drunk, George, but it doesn't matter. I've a story for you. Listen to me, both of you! Did you ever think how dangerous it can be to be rich and old and have no one belonging to you?"

"Nothing dangerous ever seems to happen when I'm around," George said sadly. "Only Church bazaars and things."

"Well, it's happening now."

She began to laugh hysterically at their faces. Rodney took hold of her and firmly put her sitting in the chair. Then he patted her shoulder in a very comforting manner and said: "Good girl! Take it easy!"

"Now we're feeling businesslike, aren't we?" said Mrs. Magee.

Bessie could have told her that we weren't, that, in fact, we felt quite the contrary since Dr. Jim had given us our injection half an hour previously. But she said nothing and smiled at Mrs. Magee.

"Looking very nice, too." Mrs. Magee gave a satisfied tweak to the frilly pillow-case. "I'll bring Mr. Higgins right up."

Bessie lay still and listened to the footsteps going downstairs. She listened for any sound in the room. There was none. She held her breath and listened. There was no sound in the room. She heard footsteps coming upstairs, clenched

her fingers on her handkerchief and then relaxed and was smiling at Mr. Higgins when he came in.

"Glad to see you so well." He pulled a chair to the bedside and sat down with his brief-case on his lap. "I hear you're improving every day."

Bessie smiled dreamily. Mr. Higgins opened the brief-case.

"I won't keep you long." He handed her two typed sheets of vellum. "Now, if you read this, I'll call Mrs. Magee in and we can witness your signature."

Bessie took the typescript. It was an effort to hold it. She tried to read, but that was impossible. She said, apologetically: "I'm afraid my eyes won't focus properly."

Mr. Higgins took the document gently from her.

"Clients often prefer to have their wills read to them." He laughed. "I hope you don't share my aversion of being read aloud to. I had a father who insisted on doing it to his children at bed-time. Unfortunately for us, he had a passion for Sir Walter Scott."

Bessie said, hoarsely: "That would be off-putting, all right."

Mr. Higgins began to read. Bessie closed her eyes.

". . . and I hereby revoke all other wills and testaments whatsoever . . ."

"Louder, please," said Bessie.

Mr. Higgins raised his pleasant voice.

". . . I bequeath the sum of . . ."

"Louder, please. My ears," explained Bessie, vaguely.

Slowly, clearly, Mr. Higgins read aloud each clause of Bessie's will. At the end, she opened her eyes and gave him a sweet, tremulous smile.

"Would you mind reading it just once more? I'm being shockingly troublesome, but I seem to find it hard to concentrate."

With great patience and distinctness, Mr. Higgins obliged.

"Everything clear now, Miss Byrne?"

"Clear as mud, thanks."

"Exactly as you want it?"

"Exactly."

When she was sitting propped against pillows, with Mr. Higgins on one side of her and Mrs. Magee on the other, Bessie's hand, holding the pen, began to shake. But she steadied herself and blindly signed her name. Mrs. Magee signed carefully and scratchily after Mr. Higgins, and then gave an automatically cheerful pat to the bed.

"That's that! Though, mind you, Mr. Higgins, I'd say there was no need for our friend here to bother about making her will for years and years to come!"

"None," said Mr. Higgins, "but we lawyers must live."

Mrs. Magee went out laughing brightly. Mr. Higgins was putting the will in his brief-case when Bessie stretched out a weak hand.

"May I have it, please?"

"You want to glance over it again? Certainly."

"I want to keep it here."

"My dear lady!" Mr. Higgins let the will drop into his case and stood up. "That wouldn't be at all advisable. Too many people in and out in any nursing home. Wills are precious things, you know, and I'm responsible for this one." He closed the case and tapped it significantly. "I'll hold it safe for you for the present."

The picture of a childishly obstinate old lady, Bessie said, shakily: "I really would like to keep it."

Mr. Higgins chuckled.

"You're a headstrong woman, but you won't get your own way this time. I'll mind this for you until you come to the office to claim it."

He laughed and, wagging his head indulgently at this foolish client, moved towards the door. There was a loud clatter behind him. His hand on the door-knob, he turned back to the room as the closet mirror swung open and George

Pepper and a bed-pan emerged noisily together. George said, mildly: "She really would like to keep it."

Mr. Higgins still grasped the door-knob. He looked at George. George bent, and delicately and unobtrusively replaced the now cracked utensil in the closet. Mr. Higgins looked at Bessie. She was engrossed in the pattern of her handkerchief. He raised his eyebrows.

"If this is your conception of the freedom of the press, Mr. Pepper, I doubt if your editor will approve your methods."

"Oh, I think he will," said George.

"Whatever explanation you may have, I'll hear it outside. In the meantime"—Mr. Higgins shot an angry, warning frown at George and a solicitous glance at Bessie—"I'll call Mrs. Magee to attend to her patient."

He turned again to the door. It opened in his face. Rodney came in and decisively shut out a quick glimpse of Mrs. Magee hovering anxiously on the landing. Locking the door, he said, as mildly as George: "She really would like to keep it, you know."

For a moment, Mr. Higgins was motionless except for his eyes flickering from one to another. Then he smiled.

"Act Three, Scene Three, of an old-fashioned farce?"

"Not the knockabout type, though. You or I would hardly care for anything so crude." Rodney indicated the brief-case. "May I?"

"I have always depended on brains rather than brawn," said Mr. Higgins, and handed it over.

While Rodney studied the will, Mr. Higgins, leaning one shoulder against the wall, watched him with detached amusement. George watched Mr. Higgins. Bessie rolled her handkerchief into a tight ball.

"Very nice," said Rodney, at last. "I know you and George have heard this twice already, Bessie, but I think you'll both find a third hearing interesting."

"Perhaps we should consider Miss Byrne's condition," Mr. Higgins suggested.

"Oh, Bessie's tough."

"She doesn't look it at the moment," said Mr. Higgins, thoughtfully, "but she must be."

There were no interruptions while Rodney read the will aloud. His delivery was quite as dulcet as Mr. Higgins's had been and far more accurate, for it included what Mr. Higgins had omitted, a bequest of seven thousand pounds to Dr. James Smith-Crowley, physician, Elm Road, Ballykeen, Co. Waterford, for the advancement of science and in recognition of his devoted services to the testator.

Bessie gasped and tore one edge of her handkerchief. George, forgetting himself, gasped too, and then became very cool and leaned his shoulder against the wall as nonchalantly as Mr. Higgins. Mr. Higgins waited silently.

"You never guessed, did you, Bessie darling, that you were leaving Dr. Jim such a nice little sum?"

"No." Bessie shuddered. "No."

"For the advancement of science," said Rodney, appreciatively, "is a pretty touch."

Mr. Higgins coughed.

"My client may not be exactly clear-headed about her instructions."

"Do you really think, Mr. Higgins, there's any point in saying any more?"

"Well, at present," said Mr. Higgins, "I suppose not."

"Or ever?"

"If you're thinking of making trouble, I'll fight it." Mr. Higgins gazed reflectively at Bessie and at George. "One sick woman. One cub reporter. I'll certainly fight it. But perhaps we could agree to let the whole matter drop? That would be the easiest way out for all of us."

"For you and Dr. Jim, certainly."

"Even if my client is confused regarding her instructions,

as could happen in her present state of health"—ignoring an unmannerly smile from George, Mr. Higgins continued blandly—"even if so, Dr. Smith-Crowley can hardly be held at fault for any irregularity in her will."

Rodney said, softly: "I think perhaps he can."

Mr. Higgins gazed at him, and then at George, inflexible by the closet, and then at Bessie. Suddenly Bessie gave a small whimper.

"Rodney, please take me away. I've had enough. I don't like that man's face. And Melly. Don't let them get hold of Melly!"

"Don't fuss, Bessie darling! She's with the Workhouse Graces."

"Ah," said Mr. Higgins, musingly. "The efficient Miss Brown! I begin to understand."

Rodney unlocked the door.

"Good-night, Mr. Higgins."

"Mr. Higgins!" Bessie sat up. Politely attentive, Mr. Higgins waited. "You'll laugh your head off when you hear this!" Bessie began to laugh herself. "All that money that you and I were dishing out, Mr. Higgins—it's not there, you know." Screeching, she pushed her handkerchief into her mouth and mumbled through it. "I haven't a nickel in the world except what Rodney gives me."

Mr. Higgins did not laugh his head off. Instead he stared expressionlessly at Bessie until she stopped laughing and stared back defiantly.

"Dear old lady," Mr. Higgins said softly, and went.

When Bessie was brought to the Workhouse by Rodney, her room was being given the final touches. Borgia was rubbing a scrubbed deal table with linseed oil, Paul was creating a chaste effect with three sprays of shaded blue sweet-pea in a painted jam-jar and Peter was putting a packet of white powder beside the bed. Only Melly, doing nothing, stood

sullen and glowering.

"Excitement," said Peter, placing a spoon beside the powder, "is inclined to react on the stomach."

Bessie looked thankfully at the bed.

"All of me feels a bit queer."

Melly laughed shortly. She looked with intense dislike at everyone and then concentrated on the Graces.

"You pretended to take no notice of what I was trying to say to you."

"But of course we took notice, child," said Peter briskly, "only it was hard to judge how much of what you were trying to say to us was imagination."

Melly turned to Bessie.

"And so you put yourself deliberately as bait." She gave another unpleasant laugh in the direction of Rodney. "Leaving me to worry myself sick."

Bessie said, indignantly: "I've a damn bad heart, and don't you forget it! I thought it was up to me to test out your Dr. Jim's treatment—me, a wealthy old woman that could pay well for my quackery! I'm the ideal guinea-pig." She giggled. Melly glared. Bessie stopped giggling and looked plaintive. "And as for worrying—why shouldn't you worry about bait? It's a most uncomfortable thing to be, I can tell you."

Paul caught Melly's hand.

"We thought it better to tell you nothing, dear, because you have a such a lovely transparent nature."

Rodney nodded sternly at Melly.

"Chuck it, my girl! You know very well you're the star of the show." He twirled an invisible moustache. "Foiled 'em, by gad!"

"Miss Byrne's shivering. A cup of hot Bovril, that's what she needs," said Borgia, and hurried off to get it.

"Hot Bovril!" Bessie sighed happily. "Such a comforting, ordinary thing." She smiled gratefully at Peter and

Paul. "Comforting, ordinary people." She shivered again. "I've just realised this moment that I'd have been rather in the way if I'd stayed alive much longer once that will was signed—if things had gone right for Mr. Higgins." She frowned. "I don't mind dying naturally—well, we all have to put up with that—but there's something so insulting about being *pushed* off."

"They'd probably have waited and left you hopefully to God, Bessie darling. And if He didn't do the job and you went to look for your will, I think you'd find it had met with an accident. In any event," said Rodney, consolingly, "I'm sure whatever would be done, would be done quite pleasantly."

"Thank you," said Bessie tartly.

In a tone that brooked no more nonsense, Peter said: "Into bed!" and drove out Rodney and Melly.

Sipping her Bovril, with Peter and Paul watching her, Bessie said, wonderingly: "After all the trouble I took to keep out of the Workhouse, I've come running to it at last."

"We're very glad to have you," Peter said.

Bessie looked long and strangely at the two Graces.

"I've no right to be here with you."

Thinking of Mickey, restless in the boiler-room until Monday, and of Jane, possibly making one of her courageous, wasteful attempts at pastry in the kitchen; thinking, too, of Pompey, no doubt at this very moment balefully eyeing Tim from a parlour chair, Paul admitted that the Workhouse was more crowded than usual. But she added, truthfully, that there was plenty of room left.

Bessie drew a deep breath and put down her cup.

"The first time I met Sarah she told me I was no better than I should be."

"Sarah," said Paul, regretfully, "is inclined to be rude to her visitors. She considers it one of the privileges of age."

Bessie shook her head determinedly.

"Sarah was perfectly right. I'm not."

An anxious glance passed between Peter and Paul. Then Peter said that a little nap would be the most settling thing now.

Bessie said, crossly: "I don't want a nap. Can't you understand that I'm trying to confess about my immoral life and you won't even let me begin?"

They told her, soothingly, that of course she could begin whenever she pleased, though it might be better to wait until she had had a sleep first. Peter said there couldn't be any great hurry, surely, because whatever dreadful things Bessie had done must all have happened a long while ago, and Paul, hastening to amend this *gaucherie*, said that Bessie looked remarkably fresh and youthful still. Bessie heard them despairingly.

"Why do you keep on making it so difficult for me?"

The Graces exchanged another anxious glance. Then each folded her hands in her lap and became patiently attentive.

"If you feel it would do you good to talk, my dear," Peter said, "talk!"

In a high-pitched voice, Bessie said: "I will. What I want to tell you is that from the day I left Ballykeen I lived on men."

"Oh, my goodness," said Paul, "that was terrible."

"Terrible," said Peter.

They still appeared nothing more than patiently attentive. Bessie felt justly annoyed.

"I may be ill, but that's no reason to treat me as if I were a child. You needn't pretend you're not shocked."

"Indeed we're shocked." Paul coughed delicately. "I've always heard being on the streets is a most wearing life. It didn't leave much traces on you."

"I wasn't one of those," said Bessie, shocked herself. "I was what's called a kept woman."

"Oh!" Paul pondered. "You mean you were a mistress?"

"That's it, I suppose."

"Even so——" Paul looked sympathetic. "All those men!"

"Four," said Bessie.

"Oh! Only four?" Hastily Paul added: "Very, very bad, of course."

"Very bad," said Peter.

"I *am* bad," said Bessie, satisfied at last.

Paul said, gently: "You mean *you were*."

"In the same circumstances," declared Bessie, "I'd do the same again."

Peter regarded her with the first hint of severity.

"The wages of sin——"

"They were good," said Bessie.

Peter's jaw became squarer than ever. Paul studied Bessie with mingled horror and respect.

"You must have been a very clever girl."

"Not particularly," said Bessie, puzzled. "Just pretty and lively."

Paul repeated, firmly: "Clever. After all, most women do live on men, one way or another, but from what I'm told, they're so mean it's hard to live comfortably on them." She hesitated. "But I've never met a mistress before. Perhaps they do better than wives."

"Better for a time, anyway." Bessie looked at Peter's inflexible jaw and sighed. "I wanted to stay with you both until—well, it can't be long at the best—and now you won't care to have me. But I had to be honest with you."

Peter said, bluntly: "We've had to keep worse in the old days. And now maybe you'd stop talking——"

"Please! If you don't mind listening——"

Paul leaned forward eagerly.

"We don't mind."

Bessie settled back to enjoy herself in a perverse fashion.

"My first day in London, I walked around very lonely and

miserable, looking for work. In a shabby street, there was a notice on the door of a shabby little music-hall, saying: Girls Wanted. I didn't know what they were wanted for—scrubbing, I thought—but, anyway, I was a girl and I went in. That night I was prancing up and down the stage with eleven other girls, all of us in frilly pink pantalettes."

"You *must* have been intelligent," said Paul triumphantly, "to learn so quickly."

"Anyone with legs could have learned equally quickly. Well, an agent——"

She paused. Peter said: "H'm?" Paul looked sad.

"Yes," said Bessie. "Soon he had me in a much bigger theatre where I wore blue pantalettes with seven others, and soon after that, in a dress right down to the ground, I had the stage to myself for five minutes while I sang a song about daisies and buttercups. A very exalted personage came to the theatre one night. Fortunately, he wasn't musical."

She paused again. Again Peter said: "H'm?" Again Paul looked sad.

"Yes," said Bessie. "Naturally, that gave me a certain cachet. After him, there was a baronet. A nice chap and I was fond of him, but he hadn't a bean."

"Tragic," Paul murmured.

"Tragic," said Bessie. "By the time he married eventually—a good match, I'm glad to say—I'd met Rodney's father."

Both nuns sat upright. Peter said: "That's the last of the four." Paul looked relieved.

"He was a manufacturer. Jam, mostly."

Paul's gaze wandered to her stark sweet-pea arrangement. She said, dreamily: "Jam."

"Pickles, too. He'd have married me, only for his wife. We lived together for twenty years in Hampstead in a nice little house and Rodney lived with us. His mother couldn't be bothered to bring up Rodney, so I did. I tried to make a good job of it."

"You and your companion," said Peter primly, "were a very poor example for any growing boy."

"We were a good example for Rodney, really, I suppose, only it didn't seem to help him. Oh, well, let that pass!" said Bessie, hurriedly. "When his father died, I felt like a widow."

Peter said, sharply: "The point is, you weren't."

"She only said she *felt* like one, Peter."

"She had no right whatever to feel like one, Paul."

"I'll go tomorrow," said Bessie.

"Don't talk rubbish!" said Peter, angrily. "And stop talking altogether now and go to sleep!"

Summoned to the Workhouse, Mr. Higgins came urbane and pleasant as ever. He sat in the parlour, listening to Peter. Paul spoke hardly at all. Occasionally, Tim whined longingly outside the door. At last Peter folded her hands and said: "Well?"

Mr. Higgins said: "We-ell."

He waited. The rosary beads slid rapidly through Paul's fingers on his behalf. Peter, well accustomed to play this game with Reverend Mother, waited too. She won. Mr. Higgins spoke first.

"A reasonable proposition, Sister. I keep my mouth shut about young Coyle and you remain in your Workhouse—and you keep any necessary mouths shut about whatever misunderstanding may have arisen tonight in the Sancta Maria."

"Yes," said Peter.

"Neat and simple blackmail on both sides," said Mr. Higgins, with detached admiration.

An involuntary moan escaped from Paul. The beads rattled violently as she included Peter and herself in her petition for mercy. Peter gave her one brief, cold glance before turning again to Mr. Higgins.

"We have too many people depending on us at the moment to allow us the luxury of putting you and Dr. Smith-Crowley to jail."

"With your chief witness obviously suffering from delusions of wealth, I doubt if you'd ever succeed in getting us there."

"We'd have a good try."

"Possibly. In any event, between us all, if you don't mind me saying so, we'd raise one hell of a stink in the country. It certainly saves everyone a great deal of worry and discomfort to let bygones be bygones."

Peter looked at him steadily.

"We will take good care that you and your accomplice will do no more harm. I warn you that from now on we'll be keeping an eye on you both."

"You mustn't exaggerate our failings, Sister. There was very little scope in a small town and none at all now, of course, with that eye on us. In fact, the easiest thing for me to do," said Mr. Higgins, confidently, "is to turn over a new leaf."

Paul whispered: "Oh, please! Please! For your own sake." She blushed and gripped her beads. "A good Confession, Mr. Higgins——"

"Why, I'm noted for being attentive to my religious duties," said Mr. Higgins. "It'll have to be a newer leaf than that."

"Good-bye!" said Peter.

Mr. Higgins stood up.

"It's a pity we always meet in such unpropitious circumstances."

"It's a pity we meet."

"I couldn't agree with that. Well," said Mr. Higgins, "the best laid schemes——" He smiled resignedly at Peter and Paul. "Somehow, yours always seem to be laid just a little too well to go agley."

Chapter Fifteen

George Pepper, journalist, swaggered through Ballykeen on this Sunday morning. In his hip pocket he carried moral dynamite. The Workhouse Graces had, alas, decreed it could not be used, but it exhilarated the ink in a man's veins to know it was there. Passing from twelve o'clock Mass, Mr. Higgins said, pleasantly: "Good-morning, Mr. Pepper." George patted the note-book in his hip pocket, said: "Ah! Higgins!" and swaggered on.

In his inside breast pocket was more dynamite. He was on his way to use that.

The Dillons' Ellie, coming crossly from the kitchen to answer the door-bell in the middle of getting dinner at this hour of a Sunday morning, was reluctant to admit him. Being an intelligent girl, she guessed by this time exactly what effect George Pepper would have on her employer's digestion, and she was anxious that her Yorkshire pudding and cherry flan would be properly appreciated. But she was a kind girl, and said, politely, that she couldn't disturb the master now, but perhaps Mr. Pepper would leave a message.

George said, gravely: "I'm afraid you must disturb him. It's serious."

Ellie gasped. The first thing she thought of was death. That should rightly mean a telegram, but sometimes newspaper people heard of accidents sooner than anyone else. When she was reassured that all Dillon relatives were, as far as George was aware, alive and well, the next thing she thought of (seeing how set and grim Miss Girlie's young man looked) was birth. Immediately ashamed of herself for her low mind (because such things don't happen to the Dillon

class of people, and Miss Girlic was just the same as ever, and, anyway, it wouldn't be her young man would be breaking the news, but Miss Girlic herself, and there was certainly nothing like that going on in the dining-room where the family was waiting quietly for dinner), she let him in.

"You needn't worry," said George, as she shut him in the drawing-room. "It's important and urgent. Mr. Dillon won't be annoyed with you."

He was wrong there. The master, as Ellie told her boy friend that night, nearly burst a blood vessel. He asked Ellie what kind of a bloody fool she was, and then asked his wife why she wasn't even capable of training a servant to answer the door properly.

Stung by the degrading word, but pale and proud, Ellie said that she was sorry if she'd made a mistake. She didn't realise she should have turned even urgent and important things from the door. It was hard for a girl to know what to do. She'd know better, she said, next time.

Agonised by the fear of losing her treasure (still an impeccable boiler of eggs) who was looking as if there would be no next time, Mrs. Dillon said, ingratiatingly: "You were quite right to use your own judgment, Ellie. The master knows that, too." The master grunted and Ellie retired to her kitchen, to brood dangerously on the word.

When the three Dillons were left to themselves, Mr. Dillon naturally turned on his womenfolk. He began with his wife.

"This is the result of your gabbing to that young puppy at that blasted cocktail party!"

"I told you," said Mrs. Dillon, pale and proud as Ellie, "that it was he insisted on talking to me. He talked to you, too."

Mr. Dillon attacked his other intolerable female.

"If that fellow thinks that because people have to be decently polite to him in public he can push his way into this house, he's making a big mistake."

Palest and proudest of all, Girlie said: "He's in."

Mr. Dillon let out a strangled roar. Mrs. Dillon said, sharply: "Don't be impertinent to your father!"

"Calling people puppies isn't impertinent, I suppose? Or shouting at women? A manly man," said Girlie, as her father's veins stood out like ropes, "doesn't shout at women. It denotes an inferiority complex."

"If I thought I was inferior to *you*," said Mr. Dillon, "I'd cut my throat. What's the fellow come for?"

Girlie smiled.

"Why not ask him?"

"Oh, so you know, do you?"

"George and I have no secrets from each other."

"You'll have none from me either, my girl! Out with it!"

"George will tell you." Small and fragile and dauntless, Girlie raised her eyes to the towering bulk of her enraged parent and spoke to the middle button of his waistcoat. "He made me promise to let him be the one to do it. He's a manly man."

Mrs. Dillon's distraught mind sank as low as Ellie's had done. She said, fearfully: "Girlie, it's nothing that you're afraid to tell, is it?" Palely, proudly, uncomprehendingly, Girlie frowned. Her mother heaved a sigh of remorse and relief and Mr. Dillon luckily covered the awkward moment with a forceful estimation of young Pepper's manhood.

"I'll go and kick him out."

"If you do," said Girlie, "you can kick me out, too."

"By God, that wouldn't cause me a day's worry either."

Mrs. Dillon judged it necessary to assume the terrible, thankless rôle of home-maker.

"It surely would be more sensible to go and speak to Mr. Pepper, William, than to stay arguing here with Girlie." Remembering the only one whose departure could cause her any real pang, she said: "It's nearly dinner-time and you know how fussy Ellie gets if the food has to wait."

Father and daughter were instantly united in contempt of the home-maker. With a gentle smile, Girlie said: "Mother!" Mr. Dillon said: "Christ!"

"She'll worry about the Yorkshire pudding," said Mrs. Dillon.

Girlie shrugged and sank back in her chair. Mr. Dillon stalked out.

Patting his breast pocket for encouragement and whistling softly, George had had ample opportunity since his arrival to study every picture on the drawing-room walls. They would have seemed only fairly bad except for a Utrillo reproduction (Girlie, of course) which made the rest seem very bad. He was staring a lumbering Aran fisherman as straight as possible in his shifty eyes when Mr. Dillon came in. George turned to meet his eyes instead. They were direct and bloodshot and extraordinarily unwelcoming.

"Well?" said Mr. Dillon.

George said, formally: "I must apologise for calling unexpectedly."

"Well?" said Mr. Dillon.

George had rehearsed a nice little preparatory speech. He jettisoned it in favour of that which he had declaimed to Mr. Simpson. He drew himself to his full height and then, with an effort, an inch over. In a resonant voice, he said: "I have secured a lucrative position in a New York publishing firm. I am leaving next week for——" He hesitated. But the eyes annoyed him—"for the land of the free and taking your daughter with me."

"Well?" said Mr. Dillon.

"Well," said George, "that's all."

"Quite. And now good day!"

Mr. Dillon took a step towards the door. But George got to it first and barred the way.

"I think you'd better listen, Mr. Dillon."

"If that's all you have to say, I think not."

"I'm telling you that at last I can offer to keep your daughter in reasonable comfort. Isn't that important?"

"Girlie is nineteen. I myself will keep her in reasonable comfort for the next two years. After that, if she still insists on sharing what she calls your attic——"

"Penthouse, now. I start with Mr. Simpson at four thousand dollars," said George, rapidly. "That doesn't mean as much in New York as it would here, I'll admit. But it's not poverty."

Mr. Dillon appeared simultaneously surprised and unimpressed.

"Frankly, I never thought you could earn that amount at the dissecting slab."

"As a bachelor, I could gladly face the long, struggling insecurity of a literary career, but I wouldn't," said George, nobly, "ask my wife to share that sacrifice. I am entering Simpson and Schumann on the business side."

Mr. Dillon looked at George. His eyebrows went up. Then, suddenly realising that the width of the Atlantic ocean would soon roll safely between this Pepper fellow and his half-witted child, he brought them down again and held out his hand.

"I congratulate you on your good fortune, Mr. Pepper. And now——" He laughed in a man-to-man fashion—"can't we forget all this other nonsense and part on good terms? I admire a young man," said Mr. Dillon, heartily, "with the courage to strike out for himself in a new country. And who knows——" He smiled almost benignly at George, seeing him through the beautiful vision of that vast, separating sea—"in years to come, my boy, who knows?"

George coughed.

"Girlie had her heart set on a white wedding, but there won't be time for that before we leave." He murmured fondly: "For my sake, she doesn't mind doing without it."

Mr. Dillon kept his temper. It was pointless losing it with an emigrant Pepper.

"Mr. Pepper, I thought I made myself clear."

"You did."

"Then I have no more to say."

"Mr. Dillon! I have a job and fair prospects. If you still refuse to consider me as a son-in-law, it can only be me, personally, you object to."

"But of course I object to you, personally," said Mr. Dillon, forgetting the glorious Atlantic. "I can't stand the sight of you. As for the fair prospects," deliberately he sneered, "I'd need very much more security than that for my daughter. What guarantee is there that you won't be thrown out on your ear by Simpson and Whatever-it-is once they get to know you?"

Not boastfully, but making a plain statement of fact, George said: "Anyone who gets to know me won't want to throw me out on my ear."

"But I know you and I do," said Mr. Dillon, incontrovertibly. He steadied himself and again feasted his inward eye on the sundering waters. Exercising wonderful self-control, he laughed another man-to-man laugh. "But let's not quarrel! You and Girlie are very young. In years to come——"

"No," said George. "Next week."

"No. And now will you kindly get out of my way!"

George did not leave the door. Instead he turned and examined it and then opened it softly and took the key from outside.

"I've something to show you. Do you mind if I lock this?" Amazed at these cloak-and-dagger antics, Mr. Dillon made no answer. "Girlie," said George, tenderly, "may be getting impatient. It might be awkward if we were interrupted." Torn between rage and curiosity, Mr. Dillon still said nothing. George went over to a small table, moved aside two

silver ash-trays and a vase of carnations, put his hand to his inside breast pocket and sighed. "It's a pity. I really do feel that in other circumstances we'd get on well together."

Mr. Dillon watched these preparations cautiously. Was the fellow odd? Schizophrenic or something at that age? George placed his other hand outspread on the table and leaned on it. He looked, thought Mr. Dillon, watching him more and more cautiously, exactly like a schizophrenic chairman.

"An Irish chap who works on an English weekly was back here a while ago on holiday. He's an old friend of the Workhouse Graces. I met him and got quite pally with him myself. Naturally, he knew about Girlie and so on." George paused. "It's the sort of weekly that goes in for candid's." He paused again inquiringly. "You know about infra-red lenses and all that?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," said Mr. Dillon.

"Well, this chap came across a bunch of rejects in the office one day and he thought some of them might amuse me and he sent them on." George pulled the dynamite from his pocket and spread it on the table. "Clever photography, isn't it?"

Mr. Dillon looked.

Every man needs to relax and be light-hearted occasionally. Sensible men go far away from their homes for this purpose and, if their home-towns are small, far away from those, too. Mr. Dillon was a sensible man. In Ballykeen or, indeed, anywhere within the shores of Ireland, he was a stolid pillar of society; the three photographs now lying on the little table showed that, outside them, he could be a sprightly elf.

The photography was undeniably clever; it was also nasty. Happy at midnight in the restaurant off Piccadilly, Mr. Dillon had known nothing of infra-red lenses operating from a nearby miniature camera. Had he known, in the mood he had then been in he might even have cared nothing. It was

obvious that no one in that merry group of wholesalers and their higher staff on the loose was caring about anything at the time.

In one photograph, Mr. Dillon, wearing a paper crown and festooned with somebody's private secretary, all arms and bosom, was crookedly raising his glass on high. In another, Mr. Dillon, his crown now at a perilously jaunty angle, was dancing cheek to cheek with something slinky in black. In the third photograph, Mr. Dillon and the same slinky thing in black were inextricably entwined on a sofa while a gipsy trio, bending over them, played encouraging music.

In all three photographs Mr. Dillon looked old, fat, drunk and silly.

A spasm of real physical pain gripped him. He had been happy that night (though not the following morning); he had felt young and gay and irresistible. The girl in black—Alma? Thalma?—had told him he was irresistible. She had patted his cheek and called him her wild Irishman. The secretary—Brunswick's? Or maybe Fenton's? Very efficient, Brunswick or Fenton had said—had begged him to sing an Erse song. Even though, by lying so heavily on his chest, she had made it difficult to oblige her, he had managed the first verse of 'The Bold Fenian Men'. He had been, he thought, the life and soul of that party.

And all the time he had looked like this.

He straightened himself and stared across the table at George.

"Very pretty."

"They're . . ." George gathered up the photographs. "Clever photography," he repeated, lamely.

"Exceedingly." Mr. Dillon laughed gratingly. "Girlie tells me you and she have no secrets from each other."

"That's not quite accurate. Girlie has none from me."

"I see." Unemotionally, Mr. Dillon said: "That must be a filthy rag your friend works on."

"No English magazine would use these." George shuffled the photographs aimlessly. "They wanted some pictures for an article on London night life. They got some amusing ones."

"Hardly as amusing as these, surely?" George, playing uncomfortably with the photographs, was silent. In the same unemotional tone, Mr. Dillon said: "I presume your idea is to strike some sort of bargain?"

George shuffled the photographs.

"I suppose so."

"You're a dirty blackguard," Mr. Dillon said, with a faint degree of heat. He began to walk about the room. His back to George, he stopped in front of the fisherman. "It was all very harmless. A works outing."

"I'm sure."

"People are inclined to let themselves go on these occasions."

"Of course."

"You find the pictures funny, Mr. Pepper?"

George said, wretchedly: "Well—they could be called funny."

"They could be called very funny. I'm sure Girlie would find them so. And everyone else that sees them. Except, perhaps, my wife."

George cleared his throat.

"No one need see them, of course."

"I understand you well enough, you scum," said Mr. Dillon, levelly.

George cleared his throat again.

"Harmless and funny," said Mr. Dillon. "Simply a man making a bloody fool of himself. I went back alone that night to my hotel."

"I'm sure."

"Anyone could be sure that ass in the photograph would go back alone to his hotel."

"I didn't mean that."

"Well, *I* mean it. Ballykeen would have the best laugh it's had for years over that old imbecile's antics. I'd rather that rat with the camera had taken me decently in bed with a woman." He swung around from the fisherman. George stared blankly at his face. "The one that's draped all over me called me her wild Irishman." George continued to stare. "I look the part, don't I?" Mr. Dillon's bitter smile left his miserable eyes untouched. "A man of my age should at least know how to conduct himself according to his years."

George swallowed. He said, slowly: "A man of any age is entitled to enjoy himself."

"Her wild Irishman!"

"Dammit!" shouted George, "you can't say she looks as if she didn't mean it!"

"The life and soul of the party!" Mr. Dillon's shoulders drooped. "Well, I've learned my lesson."

"Hell!" said George, and tore up the photographs.

Mr. Dillon watched the scraps of pasteboard flutter to the carpet. George watched them, too. Then they looked at each other.

"That," said Mr. Dillon, mildly, "was rather impetuous."

George said: "Hell!" again.

"However, perhaps your friend has the negatives?"

"If he has, he can keep them. I'm going," said George, furiously, "but, by Christ, in two years' time I'll be your son-in-law, like it or not! And you and I will go out on the town and wear paper hats and make whatever bloody fools we want to make of ourselves and to hell with everybody!"

"I'll remember that invitation," said Mr. Dillon, politely.

"Go to the devil!" said George, and made for the door.

Mrs. Dillon and her daughter had been snapping at each other for three-quarters of an hour when they heard the

drawing-room door open and footsteps in the hall. Girlie stood up, trembling.

"If he's said no to George, now, Mother, it can only be spite. Spite and hate."

After her session with Girlie, Mrs. Dillon herself was spiteful and hating.

"Your father will do what he thinks best."

Passionately, Girlie said: "I could live on a——"

"Crust," said her mother, wearily, who had been told all too often what little nourishment Girlie required with the proper companion. "I wonder what's happening to dinner."

Girlie, lips parted, paid no heed.

"They're still in the hall. That's a good sign. After all, Daddy must see reason."

Mrs. Dillon had, early in married life, abandoned hope of this. She did not bother to disillusion her child (who shouldn't have needed it) but listened, anxious to hear the front door close on young Pepper and to have William come in, in however horrible a mood, to prevent Ellie's worse one, though the remainder of the day was bound to be unbearable now, anyway.

When both men entered the dining-room together, both women stiffened in astonishment. Rapt, wide-eyed, Girlie gazed at her father's hand resting on her lover's arm. Mrs. Dillon closed her incredulous eyes. When she opened them the hand was still where she had imagined it to be.

"Yes, well." Smiling a broad, hearty smile, Mr. Dillon propelled George forward. "I think you know my wife, George." Neither woman was yet capable of speech or movement. "Yes, indeed. Quite so. Meet your future son-in-law, my dear!"

Girlie screamed: "Oh, *Daddy!*" and cast herself at her father. Mrs. Dillon said, feebly: "How do you do!"

"How do you do!" George said.

Girlie, lifting her head from her father's chest at the sound

of that manly voice, gazed at her bethrothed with all her soul in her eyes. George gazed back with all his in his. The moment was too beautiful. Girlie rushed to her mother and wept.

"Good heavens!" said Mrs. Dillon, dazed. "What's wrong with you *now*?"

"Too happy," said Girlie and sobbed on.

It was Mr. Dillon—rising to the occasion nicely, thought his wife, herself hampered by her hysterical daughter from doing much in that line—who calmed down everything by opening the champagne that had lurked behind the other bottles in the sideboard since Christmas. When all glasses were filled, he lifted his on high.

"To George and Girlie! Long life and happiness!"

The toast was drunk with ceremonious significance by the lovers, in a stunned way by Mrs. Dillon and, the champagne having lurked so long because it was a poor brand and too sweet, with only a slight grimace by Mr. Dillon.

"Daddy! Mother!" Girlie seemed on the verge of becoming overwrought once more. "You do like George now that you know him, don't you?"

Mrs. Dillon, beginning to come to herself, had stood quite enough nonsense.

"I can hardly say I know him yet, Girlie."

Girlie's lip quivered.

"But you feel you *will* like him, Mother?"

Mrs. Dillon snapped: "Yes."

Turning to her father, Girlie said: "Daddy!" and, even in her present exalted state, hesitated. It seemed a bit soon, considering pins and all that, for his frequently-expressed opinion of George to have altered. But Mr. Dillon was regarding George with no veins showing, so Girlie said again, hopefully: "Daddy?"

"George and I," said Mr. Dillon, benevolently, "will get on very well. We have confessed to a mutual pleasure in

argument. So many sons-in-law bore their fathers-in-law to distraction—and vice versa, of course. Meantime, they have to be careful to be polite to each other for the sake of their female bond." Absent-mindedly he refilled George's glass. "But George and I will be neither bored nor careful." He addressed his wife. "When I thought I was losing him, I found I'd miss him. I found I'd become used to him as an irritant." He frowned thoughtfully at his family. "As a counter-irritant."

"Daddy! Mother! George! It's too much luck!" Girlie opened her arms as if to embrace all this united, loving group. Then her hands fell limply to her sides. "Oh! It only makes it worse, really, because you'll be lonely for George now as well as for me."

She blinked bravely. George said, hastily: "America's off, Girlie."

"He's coming into the Stores," said Mr. Dillon. Mrs. Dillon uttered a long interrogative squeak and stared at her husband. "As a partner, so that I can't throw him out on his ear when I get to know him."

Girlie blinked rapidly and damply at George.

"Darling! I won't let you sacrifice your career for me."

"Well," said George.

"No, George."

"For God's sake," said her mother, "have sense!"

Girlie said, scornfully: "*They* think having sense is making money."

"Well—it's a fine shop," said George. He met Mr. Dillon's sardonic eye and braced himself. "Your career must be considered too, Girlie." He acknowledged Mr. Dillon's involuntary glance of admiration with a slight smirk. "After all, you and I believe in equality in marriage. To stifle your talent for *haute couture*"—he swept on through Girlie's small self-deprecating scream at his nobility—"to stifle *any* talent means an unfulfilled personality."

Girlie seemed momentarily shaken by this grave danger. But there was a martyr's set to her jaw.

"You can't compare literature and *clothes*. If one of us has to be unfulfilled——"

Mr. Dillon intervened suddenly.

"I don't see why you can't both have perfectly splendid personalities. George will have plenty of time for writing in the evenings."

He looked at George. After a pause, George said: "Yes."

"And at week-ends."

There was a longer pause here before George said: "Yes."

"And," said Mr. Dillon, with an evil, satisfied smile, "all during his holidays, of course."

Mrs. Dillon's womanly instincts came to the fore and she took pity on everyone.

"You'll have dinner with us, George."

Ringling the bell, an hour overdue, for Ellic, she turned, with simple and accustomed heroism, as women daily do, from one complicated domestic issue to another.

Chapter Sixteen

Punctually at eight o'clock on Monday morning, Mr. Simpson arrived at the Workhouse. At the sound of the car, Borgia appeared at once.

"The Sisters said would you drive up close to the door for safety so as Mickey Coyle can be slipped out without anyone being the wiser." She peered about cautiously. "Not that there's a soul around, but you'd never know." Feeling shamefully criminal and furtive, Mr. Simpson did his best to look cool. "No one," said Borgia, soothingly, "would want to make trouble unless it's dragged to their notice."

Mr. Simpson brought the car so near the door that he left himself barely room to get out of it. Borgia nodded approvingly and hurried him the few steps to the parlour.

This was crowded. Peter and Paul were speaking sternly to a weeping woman. Mickey Coyle stood by uncomfortably. A little girl, wearing a coat, sat aloof but attentive, with a cat on her lap. Mr. Simpson judged these to be the Joyce child and the Joyce cat that had caused Tim's loss of face, because the Workhouse dog was blatantly ignoring everything from another chair. For a moment Mr. Simpson, pushed unannounced into the parlour by Borgia who had scuttled off immediately, stood as uncomfortably as Mickey. Then the weeping woman, catching sight of him, uttered a long wail.

"God bless you, sir, for what you're doing for my poor boy!"

"This," said Peter, unnecessarily, "is Mickey's mother."

"You'll have your reward for it, sir," Mrs. Coyle declared, passionately.

Mr. Simpson hoped not. He thought the best chance of evading it was to leave as speedily as possible and said so. Mrs. Coyle rushed sobbing to her son.

"I'll never set eyes on you again, lovey."

"Distance," said Paul, "is nothing nowadays."

Mrs. Coyle responded to this encouragement with a keen-ing wail.

Peter said, sharply: "There's no sense in carrying on like that when it's your own fault you're not going with Mickey. I told you again and again you'd be far better off to get away from that husband of yours and start a new life for yourself."

Appalled, Mr. Simpson listened to this subversive doctrine from a nun's lips. Last night he had learned that he was to be spared George; now it seemed the Graces wished to foist this damp, wretched encumbrance on him instead. Mr. Simpson set his mouth grimly. This was once these crafty women would be foiled! Never had he realised so poignantly the absolute moral rightness of the indissolubility of marriage. Luckily, Tom Coyle's wife realised it too.

"Whatever Tom's done, I can't get out of the habit of loving him." Grovelling before Peter's scorn, she repeated defensively: "There's no getting over it."

"You're to be blamed most for making him what he is," said Peter, angrily. "Even a saint would want to bully *you*."

"I'll try to stand up to him more." Mrs. Coyle brightened a little. "Sure, God help us! that bang on the head left a great change in him. He's gone gentle as a child."

With no pity for the Goddev's possible mental deterioration, Peter said, crisply: "Let's hope he stays that way."

Mr. Simpson relaxed and smiled at Mickey and the quiet little girl with the cat. The little girl settled the coat over her knees and smiled back.

"I'm coming, too." At Mr. Simpson's slight start of apprehension (he knew now he would never feel safe until he was well away from the Graces) she explained quickly: "Only as

camouflage until we're outside the town. Richard's gone ahead with the donkey and trap to meet us."

"Oh, yes?" said Mr. Simpson, brokenly.

"Mickey can't be brought openly through town, you see. Sister Paul and I wanted to disguise him, maybe as a girl." there was a wistful note in the child's voice, "but Sister Peter said that would be silly. So then we thought it would be all right if he were put at the back of the car between the Graces and they sort of flowed over him."

"A splendid idea," said Mr. Simpson.

Sooner than he hoped, Mickey, warned to make himself small, was wedged in the car between the Graces, whose robes were arranged to give him every possible concealment; Jane, as camouflage, was very conspicuous in front; Mrs. Coyle was left with Tim and Pompey to cry gently in the parlour and Mr. Simpson drove off quickly.

Jane made most of the conversation. The Graces seemed to be silently praying (as well they might! thought Mr. Simpson); Mickey was fortunate if he were capable of breathing and Mr. Simpson, never talkative on any morning, was least so on this. But it was plain that Jane was enjoying herself hugely.

"Do you think that Guard looked after us sinisterly?"

"No," said Mr. Simpson, and accelerated.

"Nonsense!" Peter stirred. "That's young Murphy. His wife had an ingrowing toe-nail. They wanted to cut it out for her at the hospital. Washing soda, hot water and a scissors, *I* said, and do it yourself." She gave a contemptuous sniff. "She did, of course."

"When I was young," said Jane confidentially to Mr. Simpson, "I used to read detective stories. This is rather like one, isn't it?"

"Is it?" said Mr. Simpson.

"Assisting an escaping criminal."

This time Paul stirred.

"Mickey is *not* a criminal, Jane."

"Juvenile delinquent, I suppose." She addressed Mr. Simpson again. "How would you feel if a police car came after us with shrieking siren?"

"Awful."

"Perhaps. But fast driving is exciting, particularly if one has need for it." Mr. Simpson had need and he was driving fast. They had left the town now and the road ahead was empty. "I used to read love stories, too, when I was young. If this were a love story, someone in this car would be bound to marry someone else in it at the end." She paused. "It would have to be Mickey and I, actually, because no one else could." A grunt came from between the Graces. "It's all right, Mickey," she said, kindly. "I'm only theorising." She leaned over to Mr. Simpson and whispered: "He has no impulse to marry yet. He's slow in maturing."

"What kind of books," asked Mr. Simpson, desperately, "do you read now?"

"The ordinary novel. Psychological—you know the kind. People getting success and money and being miserable or going in and out of bed with each other and being miserable. It doesn't make much sense," said Jane, critically, "being miserable whether they have or haven't or do or don't, but it's all the vogue at present."

The car turned a corner and thankfully Mr. Simpson saw Richard with his equipage waiting in the shelter of some trees.

The leave-taking was brief. In silent, grim disapproval, Richard hustled his nuns from the car, settled them in the trap, and climbed in after Jane. Paul made a brave attempt at a last cheerful word.

"You'll come back some day, Mickey, with your pockets clinking with dollars."

"Rustling, I *think*," said Jane, frowning, "unless he goes to Texas."

Mickey, scarlet and sweating, took a gulp of fresh air.

"We'll be gone," said Richard, dourly, "before we're caught and disgraced for ever," and, with a black look at Mr. Simpson, put an end to any further delay by bringing his ashplant down on Billy.

Mr. Simpson turned to watch the Workhouse Graces go and then, very lonely, started off on the first perilous stage of his return to a normal, law-abiding existence.

Jane, entering the Workhouse parlour in front of Peter and Paul, found her parents awaiting her. It was an uncomfortable scene. Mr. and Mrs. Joyce were each sitting upright in an armchair. Pompey, his chair now occupied by Jane's father (who was concerned only about human, not feline psychology) was himself occupying most of Tim's and Tim was squeezed into a corner, looking like a dead dog except for an occasional twitch of the ears at low, muttering sounds from Pompey. None of the four seemed happy and Jane's father and mother had their Maria Monk faces on.

As Jane came in, Pompey uttered some rapid, hoarse screams. Jane gave him a warning glance, said: "Hallo, Mummy! Hallo, Daddy! I hope you had a nice weekend," and stood back to let the Graces deal with the situation.

They dealt with it, of course, admirably. Undaunted by the faces (now very wary and Maria Monkish indeed), they shook hands and said how much they had enjoyed having Jane staying with them. Jane's father apologised coldly for Jane; she was usually, he said, a well-balanced child, but adolescence often brought difficulties. Sending her home at once, might, he suggested, have been the wisest way of dealing with her strange little tantrum, but no doubt the Sisters had meant well. Mrs. Joyce, who detested housework, said, with an unloving frown at her child, that Margaret had always been kind to Jane and was so hurt at Jane's strange

naughtiness that she'd given a week's notice the moment the Joyces had returned.

At this Peter stopped looking polite and said, fiercely: "If I were you, I wouldn't keep that girl a day."

Mrs. Joyce looked distant and haughty.

"She's not any worse than most."

"I should hope she *is*," said Peter.

"Sister Peter means," said Jane, because both her mother and father appeared coldly uncomprehending, "that she hopes other maids aren't the same as Margaret about their natural instincts. I don't think they are, really, because they do them outside in their free time, but Margaret does them in the Cottage." Jane paused, worried. She wanted to be fair. "I don't quite know why that shouldn't be all right—because Margaret's sleeping time is her free time, too, I suppose—but I just didn't care for it." Aware of her lack of reason and logic in this distaste for Margaret's conduct, Jane paused again. "One knows one was influenced by subconscious prejudice but—well," said Jane, hopelessly. "*one was.*"

Subconscious prejudice was the thing that most annoyed Jane's father and mother. They had to battle incessantly against it in every stratum of Irish life. They had carefully trained Jane to recognise and battle against it in herself. She knew she had failed them badly. Her mother's face was very white and her father looked extraordinarily angry. In a queer voice, he said: "Margaret told us you left the house in the morning because she'd scolded you for staying up past your bed-time the previous night."

"Jane's story," Peter said, drily, "is different."

"She didn't wait until morning." Paul looked angry, too. "She and her cat came to us in the middle of the night because she didn't want to stay in the house with that—with those——"

She choked.

"You see, I'd met Margaret's friend already. I know he meant to be kind—he gave me money and patted my leg so I think he liked me, but I couldn't like him. Purely a chemical reaction, probably," said Jane, knowing this was an unsurmountable physiological fact and not to be deplored as was subconscious prejudice.

In a queerer voice, Jane's father said to the Graces: "It seems we have a lot to thank you for."

Jane's mother said: "Oh, *Jane!*"

Jane continued to do her best to be fair and accurate.

"Or maybe I didn't like him because he was rather rude to me at first. Unfortunately, I accidentally disturbed Margaret and him in the sandhills, I *think* in the act of——"

Jane's father shouted: "Stop that talk!"

Jane was surprised. She couldn't honestly recollect having used any wrong word—that is, wrong for Daddy and Mummy. But this business of words was becoming so complicated that safety seemed to lie only in complete silence. Jane sensibly stopped talking. Everyone else was talking now, mostly at the same time, and all looking angry, though not, apparently with one another. The situation was incomprehensible to Jane. Unnoticed, she went over quietly to Pompey and began to scratch him soothingly under the chin.

Paul was saying there was no need for worry, Jane was mentally undamaged. Nothing, she said, proudly, could damage Jane. Jane was a wonderful child. Jane's mother said: "Oh, Fred! *Jane!*" and Jane's father said: "It's all *right*, Alice. Can't you see by the child it's all right?" Peter said something about Meath (Jane sighed and scratched) but someone else was speaking, too, and then Peter mentioned Meath again, more loudly, and said that Margaret on top of that was too much for any twelve-year-old brain. Jane's mother said, rather stiffly, that Meath was chosen because it would leave Jane free to develop her personality and Peter gave a short, tolerant laugh and said, oh, yes, like all parents,

leaving their children free to develop the personality the parents choose.

No one spoke for a moment. They were beginning to look angry with one another now. Jane's father, also with a short, tolerant laugh, said that he and his wife at least felt that they were entitled to consider themselves exceptional in that respect. Peter said, oh, no, they weren't; Jane wanted to be one kind of person and they wanted her to be another, and whether you wanted your child to be conformist or non-conformist against the child's own inclination was simply the reverse side of the same thing. Jane's mother said surely the Sisters could understand, even if they didn't approve, that her own and her husband's aim was to keep the child uninfluenced, as far as possible, by secular or religious dogma, so that when she grew up, she could, of her own deliberate choice, adopt whatever philosophy she sincerely believed true.

Jane thought her mother had put this rather better than usual (Jane was used to hearing it), but Peter snorted scornfully and said children often did what they wanted when they grew up, anyway, and no thanks to the parents for *that*, because they couldn't stop 'em! This sounded splendidly argumentative but it wasn't really pertinent. Jane thought the discussion could go on and on for ever, with everyone evading the real issue, which was, of course, that with children being so susceptible to environment, whatever you did with a twelve-year-old person now would probably make her the future grown-up person. Thinking of County Meath and the inevitable, awful consequences of environment, Jane scratched very sadly. It could even be that the day would come when she and Pompey would no longer be *en rapport*.

Paul, who had said very little, now spoke in deep, mournful tones that tolled like a bell above all others.

"Jane is a good, obedient child. Even if she's very unhappy, she'll do what her parents wish." She addressed Jane's father

and mother. "You needn't fear she'll run away from Meath. She'll face it. She's a brave child."

Jane's father and mother stared. Her mother said: "But, Sister, this school concentrates above all on giving its pupils freedom and happiness."

"She'll face it," Paul declared with ringing confidence. "She'll come through."

Jane's father said: "Oh, my God! This is getting beyond me." To Jane, he said: "Look here! Would you like to go off by yourself and play somewhere for ten minutes?"

Other children, Jane knew, were frequently told to go off and play when their elders considered the conversation unsuitable, but never, until now, Jane. It was a most ordinary thing to be told to do. Joyfully, hopefully (for though Daddy and Mummy were middle-aged, it seemed that Peter and Paul were very strong environment) Jane gathered up Pompey and went.

She spent the interval in saying good-bye to Borgia, who gave a slice of cold roast beef to Pompey while frantically reproaching herself for this sin against the Holy Ghost, and to Richard, who promised that next time she came to the Workhouse she could ride round the courtyard, and beyond it, too, if all went nicely, on Billy, though heretofore he had crossly refused to allow her to treat the little ass as a hack. Then the ten minutes were up and Jane carried Pompey back to the parlour.

They were all sitting down quietly when she came in. The Graces' eyes were downcast; her mother's were concentrated on the toe-cap of one swinging sandal. Only her father was looking at Jane.

"I want to ask you a very important question, J.J. Think carefully before answering!"

Jane, standing with Pompey in her arms, waited. From every guarded face it was plain that the question would be very important indeed. Her father cleared his throat.

"If I told you you could choose any school in any country you wished—mind! any school at all—where would you choose?"

Jane's grip tightened convulsively on Pompey. She glanced around with a wild hope. Her father waited patiently; her mother continued to study her sandal; the Graces were stilly aloof. With her heart and Pompey's thudding together, Jane said: "The Grace boarding-school here, Daddy."

"Completely sure?"

"Completely."

With a resigned sigh, her father said: "Very well." Her mother looked up and nodded.

"Oh!" Jane stared at them. They smiled sadly. She kept on staring at them. They were terrible, but she knew they usually meant well. Now, incredibly, they were actually *doing* well. For the first time, all words, right or wrong, failed Jane and then the proper ones came in a rush. "Oh, *thank* you, Fred and Alice!"

Rodney looked down on Bessie, resting contentedly in the Workhouse not far from the ward where her grandmother had died.

"Good-bye for now, Step-mamma. I'll be over again in a few months to see how you're getting on."

"Next time you're in Ballykeen, ducks, maybe you'll find me pottering around almost like a Workhouse Grace myself."

"That'll be the day!"

"And, whenever I pop, you'll come and bury me dacent, won't you?"

"Dacent, Step-mamma."

"Roses, even it out of season, and dang the expense! You're a nice boy." She paused. "Damn you!" she said crossly, "You're too nice. You've gone and made Melly Brown fall in love with you and if you think that's funny I'll get out of this bed and hit you."

Far from laughing, Rodney looked appalled.

"But, Bessie darling——"

"The Workhouse Graces told me it's perfectly obvious," said Bessie, putting an end to all argument.

"Oh, dear me! And I'm so fond of Melly. She and I are wonderful friends."

"I know, I know. I thought I explained to her, but apparently I didn't. No one could be so devilish as to explain to her now. Well," said Bessie, determinedly, "we must try to undo the damage as far as we can. She'll have to keep you as a beautiful dream, that's all. You have a wife, Rodney."

Rodney frowned. Then he said, slowly: "So I have. Domineering. One of those chilly blondes, I think."

"And children."

"No!" said Rodney, shocked.

"Three of 'em. Wait until tonight to tell her so. There should be a moon. I think a moon would help Melly." She was silent for a while. At last she said, wistfully: "Maybe she's lucky, at that, to be one of the few that can live with a beautiful dream."

The old moon was climbing tiredly above the convent headland. Its light was sad and feeble on the dunes, on the pallid sand, on the little white waves that fell, sighing, on the dark sea's edge.

"If it weren't for the children, Melly——"

"You must forget me, Rodney."

"I can never forget you."

'Nor I you,' cried Melly, silently, hearing the small waves sigh through her heart.

"You'll be all right, Melly?"

"The Workhouse Graces are getting a job for me in Dublin. With a neurologist. He has," said Melly, awed, "a European reputation, but they say he'll be glad to take me."

"What grip have those old demons on *him*? Cured his

dyspepsia?" Melly giggled. "Oh, Melly, we had fun together, hadn't we? And excitement? You're a brave, clever girl."

"I think I'd like best to say good-bye now, Rodney. Not to walk back to town together. I'd like you to leave me here."

"As you wish, dear Melly."

He bent and laid his cheek to hers and went. She turned her head once to watch him go. He was only a distant shadow in the moonlight, and then a humped mound of sand and bitter, waving grasses hid him from her sight and she saw him no more.

She turned back to the weary moon and, deep in her inmost soul now at last and for ever Melisande, stared sadly but confidently into its battered old face.

Chapter Seventeen

At six o'clock on Tuesday morning a woman who had spent most of the night soothing a fractious, teething infant saw from her bedroom window Richard Burke banging on Dr. Gorman's door. With the first stirring of more rested neighbours, word began to circulate that Sarah Slaney was sinking fast.

All through that day, Sarah was the constant topic in Ballykeen. Even when the sky grew overcast and a mean little breeze came whipping in from the sea, for once none but the summer visitors bothered to mention the weather. Father Hanlon, coming to the convent through a rain squall, was admitted by a lay sister who made no comment on his drenched condition, but asked immediately for news of Sarah. While he waited in the parlour for Reverend Mother, nuns drifted in and out on vague pretexts, each asking of Sarah. What with these, and a constant banging and hammering echoing from the school quarters, the convent had lost much of its cloistral calm.

But Reverend Mother's, when she entered, was unimpaired. She glided in as gracefully as ever, commiserated with Father Hanlon on his damp clothes, inquired if he would care for a glass of wine as a preventative against chill and, when it was refused, sat down and waited.

Father Hanlon found himself disliking her a little more than usual. He said, abruptly: "Sarah's on the way out at last."

"Peacefully, I trust, poor soul?"

"Painlessly, anyway." In spite of himself, Father Hanlon chuckled. "Told Peter and Paul there was to be no squab-

bling over which of 'em was to get her silver mirror. Said they could——" He stopped to edit Sarah's verbs—"clear off for themselves because it was to be buried with her." He leaned towards her earnestly. "It would break your heart, Reverend Mother, to see the two poor old things watching over her and praying away like mad."

"No doubt," said Reverend Mother, with the correct measure of sympathy, "after so many years, they will miss her."

"No doubt," said Father Hanlon, shortly, and sat back.

There was a silence between them, through which the hammering and banging obtruded. Reverend Mother frowned at a sudden crash.

"The firm carrying out our school renovations is expeditious but extremely noisy. At the moment, the entire school building is a chaos of scaffolding and ladders and pails." She shook her head apologetically. "We are all at sixes and sevens."

'Not you,' thought Father Hanlon, 'you human iceberg!' Unable to endure her any longer, he stood up.

"I'll be getting back to the Workhouse."

Courteous and dignified, she moved with him to the door.

"Thank you for coming, Father."

With a surge of unpriestly rage, Father Hanlon said, crudely: "You'll be getting your own way at last, eh?"

She lowered her eyes but not before he caught the faint gleam of triumph.

When business was ended for the day, the people began to drift towards Workhouse Hill. They studied the granite Workhouse and sighed at the contrast between the frailty of humanity and the endurance of stone, saying everything must come to an end and all things vanish and it was the close of an era. Here and there, it was hinted that maybe stranger things could happen than that Blessed Mother Assumpta

would work a miracle for Sarah, thereby incidentally helping on her own canonisation, but it was the general opinion, considering the customary life span, that she had more or less worked one for Sarah already and couldn't be expected to continue for ever. Everyone said it would be a sad day when Ballykeen had no Workhouse Graces to turn to in time of trouble and people began to talk freely and almost boastfully of their own past troubles and of the Graces' aid in sickness or family worries. The more modern-minded said there was less need for the Workhouse Graces nowadays what with health clinics and mental clinics and social welfare and all the rest, but those who had had experience of these were gloomily emphatic that there was still plenty of need for the Graces. Everyone charitably agreed that it might be a relief for poor Sarah herself to be gone, and that the Workhouse Graces' peaceful retirement to the convent was well-earned for whatever years might remain to them, but it was feared (for no one wanted any silver lining today) that, being the kind they were, they wouldn't last long out of harness.

So, philosophising, sorrowful, but assisted by that secret pleasurable excitement that alleviates all but an individual's own personal calamities, the people strolled outside the Workhouse walls or stood in little groups by the gate, watching those passing in and out through the archway and avidly searching every face for information.

They watched, above all, the window of Sarah Slaney's room. When the blind was lowered there, that would be the end. It was known now that this was to be the signal to Ballykeen.

Dr. Gorman's car drove spluttering into the courtyard and drove spluttering out again. Those nearest said he looked mournful. So well might any doctor, threatened with the loss of his only patient.

Shortly afterwards, Father Hanlon came walking quickly towards the Workhouse. To give the Last Rites, someone

said. Someone else said, compassionately, that Sarah, bed-ridden all these years, hadn't had much opportunity of having any great necessity for these. To inquiries about Sarah's condition, Father Hanlon said nothing could help her now but prayer. That sounded hopeless.

When a smooth man in a long car with a Dublin licence plate swept past, he was guessed to be a big city specialist. There were known to be two strange doctors already with Sarah—one from Cork and one from the County Hospital. The people were satisfied that she was getting a good send-off.

Immediately Richard Burke was seen crossing the courtyard, some men that had been drinking a pint with him the previous night slipped in and brought him out for questioning. Richard was in an unhelpful mood.

"Those hordes of doctors with her are so high and mighty in themselves, they'd tell you nothing. And the nurse they brought with 'em is as bad. All starched and smelling like a chemist's shop." He gave a bitter laugh. "My nuns, if you please, are too *old-fashioned* for Sarah Slaney now!"

It was pointed out to Richard that it was the Workhouse Graces themselves who had got the doctors and the nurse. An emotional woman, gazing damp-eyed at that upstairs window, said having them all up there battling away for Sarah's life was terrible but dramatic.

Richard spat disgustedly on the ground.

"Considering what's been done for that Sarah these years back, you'd think she'd have the common decency to hold on to herself a while longer when that's all that's being asked of her."

Richard was a discordant note in the sad symphony. They let him go.

From then until dusk fell and light shone from Sarah's window only a few incidents broke the long wait. Once Borgia came out. It was noticed that she seemed to have

sagged like a punctured ball and walked without bounce. Another time a young man, with the faintly self-important air that marks most doctors, took from a car what several guessed to be a cylinder of oxygen. Someone said, glumly, that playing about with oxygen and artificial kidneys and the like was only trying to fool yourself and everyone else at the last stages. Some more understanding person argued that it made doctors happier to be doing something, anyway, useless and all as it might be.

At first sight of Peter and Paul, escorting the big Dublin specialist to his car, a long hiss of sympathy came from the crowd. The big specialist stood chatting a while to the Graces, shook hands with them affectionately, and waved back to them as he drove away under the archway, thereby winning all hearts. Miserably, the people studied their Graces. Both looked weary and wrinkled; both looked old; both held their rosary beads in folded hands as they turned to re-enter the Workhouse. When the door had closed on them, the emotional woman sobbed: "Asha, God help the creatures!" and a few men coughed.

By eleven o'clock the last stragglers were coming down Workhouse Hill. Only one car (probably the starched nurse's) was left in the courtyard now. Sarah's window blazed back yet at the decaying moon, but few hoped that the blind would not be down by morning.

All through the hours of darkness, wakeful eyes watched that window. Even hitherto obedient children now disobediently got out of bed and knelt on sills and flattened their noses to glass. Adults, stirring drowsily and then remembering, were suddenly wide awake and looking towards the Workhouse and then futilely trying to sleep again. In Ocean View, George Pepper, note-book on blanketed knees, was wringing the last poignant drops of ink out of his system for Friday's *Argus*, while near-by, Melly dreamed of Rodney

and, moving, thought of Sarah, and so fell back to dreaming. Mr. and Mrs. Dillon, divided in sympathy tonight as by a sword, lay as far apart as possible from each other in their big double bed; in the next room, Girlie, loving the whole world, wept happily for the Workhouse Graces. With the aid of two Nembutals, Dr. Jim slept in Elm Road; in Strand Row, Mr. Higgins, smiling in his natural slumber, was contentedly making an enormous statue of Sarah Slaney.

The convent was quiet. Each good nun kept strict custody of the eyes, though many lay praying. In her cell, Reverend Mother slept peacefully.

The Guest House was restless. The crippled lady guest and the myope were uneasy in their rooms at the back; the three others, with their grandstand front view, were drawn, as by a magnet, to that light still shining across the bay. Mrs. Murphy and Mrs. O'Donnell kept hopping out of bed and hopping back before (it was to be hoped) catching cold. The dull lady guest had not gone near her bed at all.

The dull lady guest sat in a chintz-covered arm-chair by her open window, smoking. That first cigarette at the Glebe cocktail party had aroused in her an inordinate craving for nicotine; she indulged it freely but secretly, sucking and puffing away fiercely along the cliffs and in sheltered nooks in the strand. Tonight, watching that light, vaguely aware of the sadness that would attend its extinction and with every dull nerve on edge, she had steadily sucked and puffed for hours. On the floor beside her, a chocolate-box lid held a heap of ashes and cigarette stubs.

At twenty to one, in the black, early hours of Wednesday morning, the blind came down in the Workhouse. A sigh like a little keening breeze of wind rose from the town and followed Sarah in her passing. The dull lady guest's cigarette fell from her shocked hand into the chocolate-box lid.

All at once, the dull lady guest felt sick. She did not want to smoke any more. She thought she might never want to

smoke again. She undressed, folded her clothes neatly, got into bed and went to sleep.

She woke because there was a bright light in the room. It was in the wrong place, on the floor near the window. While she blinked at it in astonishment, the light ran up one of the window curtains and the arm-chair crackled cheerfully.

Trembling, the dull lady guest got out of bed. All the pretty pink flowers on the arm-chair were blazing and the flowers on the carpet were beginning to blaze too. She grabbed the water-jug from her bedside table and took a step forward. She threw the water on a red flame coming up from the nice carpet. That flame sank down and left a horrid, sizzling mess but then other flames came along again. The room was getting very hot and, in spite of the open window, very full of smoke.

The dull lady guest went out, leaving her door open to help blow away the fire and the smoke, and shut herself in the lavatory. This was one place where nuns couldn't come and take a person and send her away for ruining her pretty bedroom.

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By three o'clock on Wednesday morning, the Grace Guest House was a smouldering, roofless shell. But the lady guests were safe. The crowd murmured sympathetically as they were brought out now from the convent to the waiting cars. They were a pathetic little group, wrapped in blankets and nuns' black shawls and herded along comfortingly by Father Hanlon and Reverend Mother.

"They'll never get over the shock at their age," said the emotional woman, who was having a wonderfully emotional twenty-four hours.

"Damn' lucky to be alive!" said the nearest bystander.

Everyone knew the lady guests were lucky to be alive. The firemen, still playing their hoses on the many sneaking, scarlet tongues amongst the ruins that continued to lap hope-

fully towards adjoining convent and school, were heroes in all eyes. Magnificent in their helmets, and at peril of their lives, they had snatched four dazed, suffocating old ladies from the inferno and then (it was rumoured) had had to batter down a door with their axes to snatch the fifth

Beside Doolin Bros' hackney car (lent for this grievous occasion without charge) the dull lady guest suddenly clutched Reverend Mother's arm.

"You won't send me away? I'll never do it again. I promise I'll never do it again."

Her stunned fellow-guests were sufficiently roused to shoot her looks of hate before relapsing back to shivering listlessness. Reverend Mother said, wearily: "We won't send you away."

When all the lady guests were in Doolin Bros' car (each stupefied one having to be packed in position like a large doll) it moved off. Reverend Mother followed with Father Hanlon. A lorry (lent without charge by Sealy and Sons, Haulage Contractors) had already gone ahead with beds, bedding and small articles of furniture.

"It is unfortunate," said Reverend Mother, "that, because of the builders, the pupils' dormitories were unfit to house the lady guests. It would have simplified matters."

Father Hanlon said: "Um." He was paying great attention to his driving.

"I'm extremely worried about them. They need sleep and rest immediately if they are to recover from their terrible experience."

"Why wouldn't they recover?" said Father Hanlon, and echoed the bystander's words. "Besides," he said, driving very carefully, "look at the good nursing they'll get!"

It was an appreciable while before Reverend Mother spoke again.

"The arrangement, of course, is purely temporary. It was the best could be devised at a moment's notice. However,

one could hardly expect Sisters Peter and Paul to be able to care for so many, even for the short time necessary. Mrs. Coyle has offered to help, and I shall send some of my younger nuns to the Workhouse to give assistance."

"You can keep your younger nuns," said Father Hanlon. "The Workhouse Graces could manage this lot on their heads."

Reverend Mother did not speak any more until the Workhouse was reached. Then, sitting upright in the car, she looked straight ahead at the bustle around Doolin Bros' hackney car and Sealy and Sons' lorry. Father Hanlon looked at it, too.

The Workhouse door opened. The Workhouse Graces came out. They came gravely from that house of mourning, but suddenly, for one fleeting instant, both pairs of hands caught their rosary beads, both faces, transfigured with incredulous gratitude and joy, were raised to heaven and then, consoling and loving, Peter and Paul hurried forward.

Father Hanlon cleared his throat.

"There's a nursery rhyme, Reverend Mother, that just came to my mind, somehow. I wonder if you know it." Reverend Mother, preparing to leave the car, stopped and politely turned her handsome, dignified head to him. "It goes something like this." He paused. The corners of his mouth twitched.

"Two little dickey birds,
Sitting on a wall,
One named Peter,
The other named Paul.
Fly away, Peter!
Fly away, Paul!"

Expressionlessly, Reverend Mother said: "I know the rhyme."

"Come back, Peter! Come back, Paul!" said Father Hanlon, unsteadily, and hunched down with his elbows on the steering-wheel.

The earl's niece looked at the peasant.

"Quite amusing, Father." She produced a light, tinkling laugh. "Other accommodation for the lady guests will soon be provided—somewhere." Father Hanlon said nothing, but one shoulder stirred. "The present arrangement," said Reverend Mother, desperately, "is purely temporary. . . ."

Her voice trailed off. Father Hanlon, unable to control himself any longer and willing to be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, shook all over with a rude guffaw. He lifted one hand and pointed at the five bewildered old ladies now being led gently into the Workhouse by Peter and Paul.

"Give it up, Reverend Mother! You know as well as I do that there, but for the grace of God, goes a coven of centenarians!"

